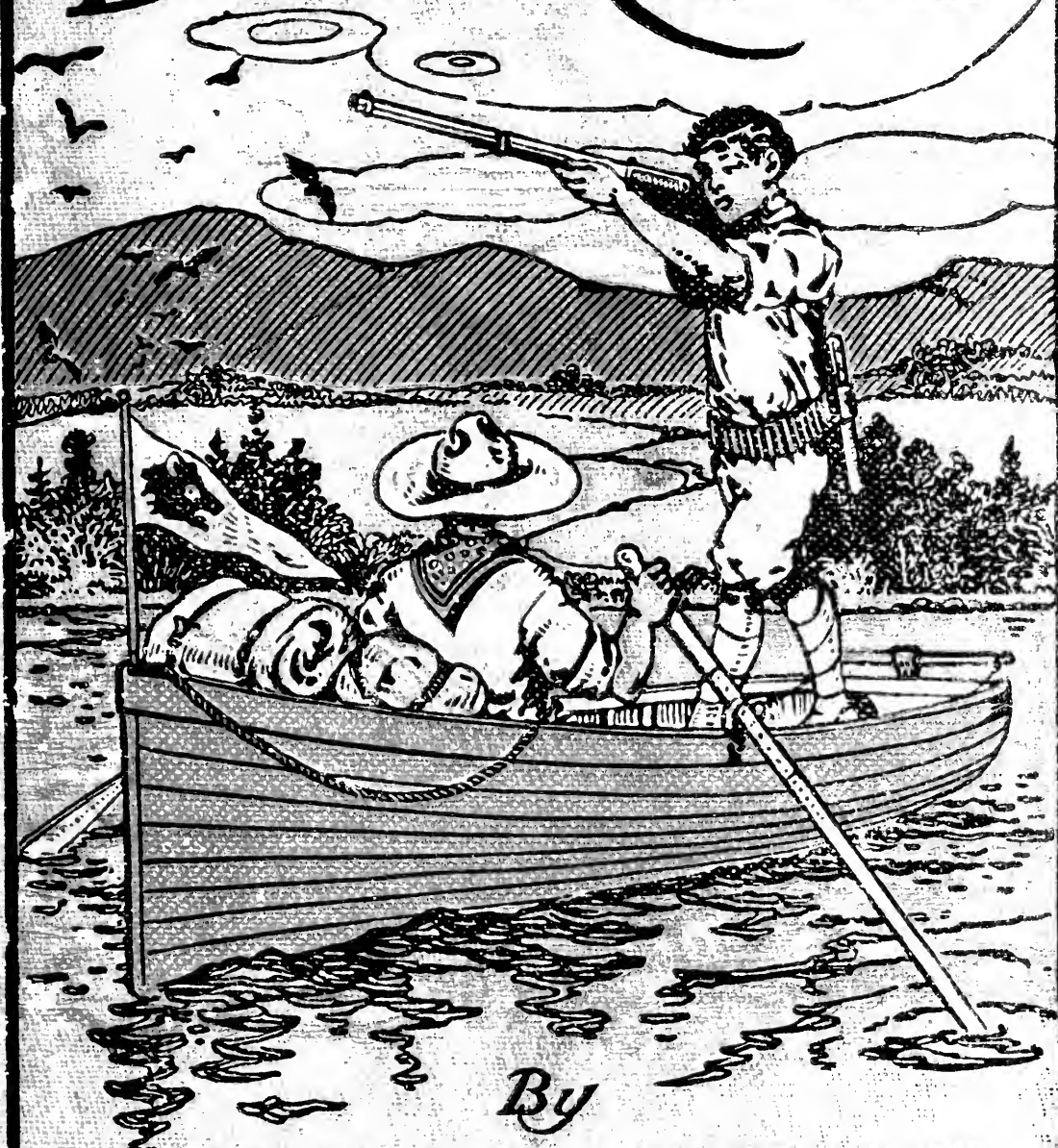
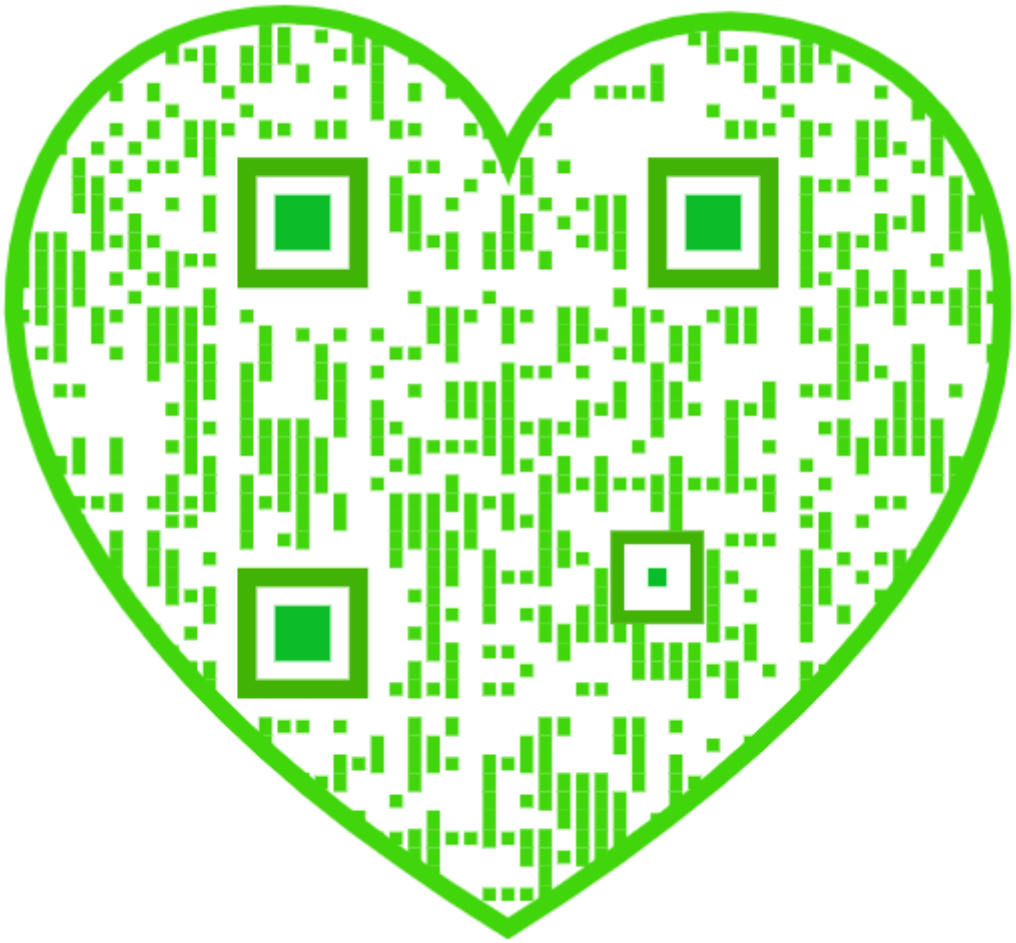
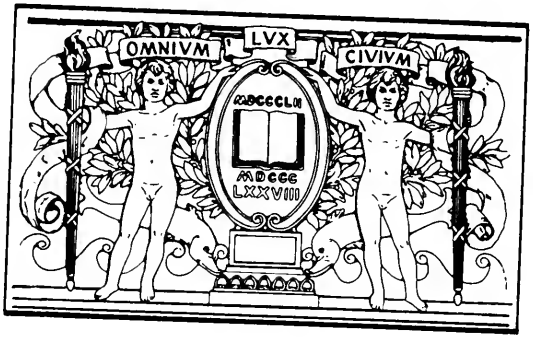
The BOY SCOUTS IN THE BLUE RIDGE



By

HERBERT CARTER





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"Good shot, Bob!" cried Thad. "Get another stone, quick, for he's coming after you. Page 146.

—*The Boy Scouts In the Blue Ridge.*

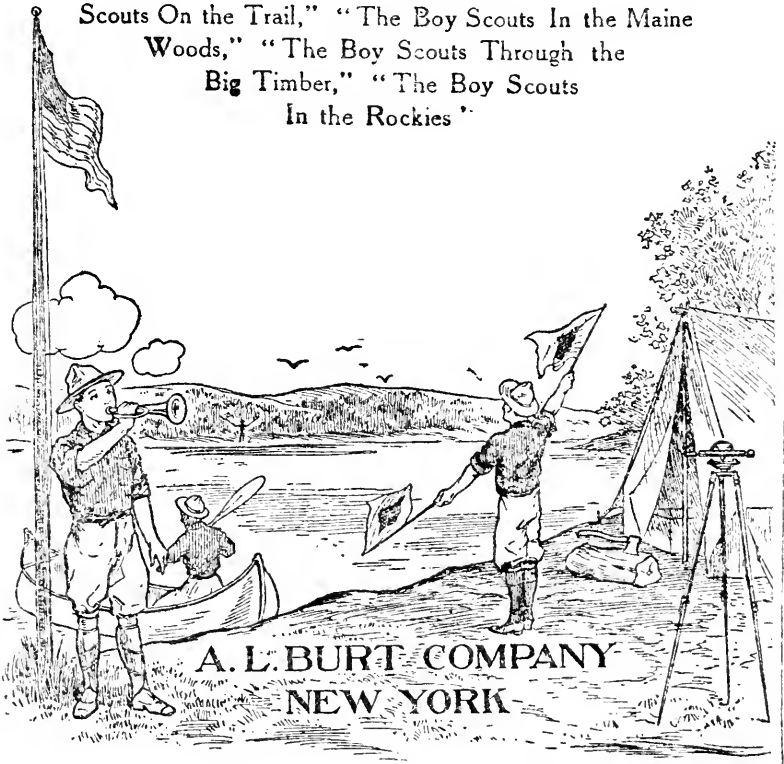
The Boy Scouts In the Blue Ridge

OR

Marooned Among the Moonshiners

By HERBERT CARTER

Author of "The Boy Scouts First Camp Fire," "The Boy Scouts On the Trail," "The Boy Scouts In the Maine Woods," "The Boy Scouts Through the Big Timber," "The Boy Scouts In the Rockies"



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THE BOY SCOUTS IN THE BLUE RIDGE.

THE BOY SCOUTS IN THE BLUE RIDGE

CHAPTER I.

THE HIKE THROUGH THE SMOKY RANGE.

"DID anybody happen to see my knapsack around?"

"Why, you had it just a few minutes ago, Step Hen!"

"I know that, Bumpus; and I'd take my affidavy I laid it down on this rock."

"Well, don't whine so about a little thing like that, Step Hen; it ain't there now, and that's a fact."

"Somebody's gone and sneaked it on me, that's what. I'm the unluckiest feller in the whole bunch, for havin' queer things happen to him. Just can't lay a single thing I've got down anywhere, but what it disappears in the most *remarkable* way you ever heard of, and bobs up somewhere else! I must be haunted, I'm beginnin' to believe. Do *you* know anything about my knapsack, Giraffe?"

"Never touched your old grub sack, Step Hen;

so don't you dare accuse me of playing a trick on you. Sure you didn't hang it up somewhere; I've known you to do some funny stunts that way;" and the tall boy called "Giraffe" by his mates, stretched his long neck in a most ridiculous manner, as he looked all around.

Eight boys were on a hike through the mountains of North Carolina. From the fact that they were all dressed in neat khaki uniforms it was evident that they must belong to some Boy Scout troop; and were off on a little excursion. This was exactly the truth; and they had come a long distance by rail before striking their present wild surroundings.

Their home town of Granford was located in a big Northern State, and all the members of the Silver Fox Patrol lived there; though several of them had come to that busy little town from other sections of the country.

Besides two of those whose conversation has been noted at the beginning of this chapter there was, first of all, Thad Brewster, the leader of the patrol, and when at home acting as scoutmaster in the absence of the young man who occupied that position, in order to carry out the rules and principles of the organization. Thad was a bright lad, and having belonged to another troop before coming to Cranford, knew considerably more than most of his fellows in the patrol.

Next to him, as second in command, was Allen

Hollister, a boy who had been raised to get the bumps of experience. He had lived for a time up in the Adirondacks, and also in Maine. When it came down to showing how things ought to be done according to the ways of woodsmen, and not by the book, the boys always looked to Allen for information.

Then there was a slender, rather effeminate, boy, who seemed very particular about his looks, as though he feared lest his uniform become soiled, or the shine on his shoes suffer from the dust of the mountain road. This was "Smithy." Of course he had another name when at home or in school—Edmund Maurice Travers Smith; but no ordinary boy could bother with such a high-flown appellation as this; and so "Smithy" it became as soon as he began to circulate among the lads of Cranford.

Next to him was a dumpy, rollicking sort of a boy, who seemed so clumsy in his actions that he was forever stumbling. He had once answered to the name of Cornelius Jasper Hawtree; but if anybody called out "Bumpus," he would smile, and answer to it. Bumpus he must be then to the end of the story. And as he was musically inclined, possessing a fine tenor voice, and being able to play on "any old instrument," as he claimed it was only right that he assume the duties of bugler to the Cranford Troop. Bumpus carried the shining bugle at his side, held by a thick crimson cord; and when he tried

he could certainly draw the sweetest kind of notes from its brass throat.

Then there was Davy Jones, a fellow who had a sinuous body, and seemed to be a born athlete. Davy could do all sorts of "stunts," and was never so happy as hanging by his toes from the high branch of some tree; or turning a double somersault in the air, always landing on his nimble feet, like a cat. Davy had one affliction, which often gave him more or less trouble. He was liable to be seized with cramps at any time; and these doubled him up in a knot. He carried some pills given to him by the family doctor at home, and at such times one of the other boys usually forced a couple between his blue lips. But some of the fellows were beginning to have faint suspicions concerning these "cramps;" and that the artful Davy always seemed to be gripped nowadays when there was a prospect of some extra heavy work at hand.

The last of the eight boys was a dark-haired lad, with a face that, while handsome, was a little inclined to be along the order of the proud. Robert White Quail was a Southern-born boy. He came from Alabama, but had lived many years in this very region through which the Silver Fox Patrol was now hiking. Indeed, it had been at his personal solicitation that they had finally agreed to take their outing in climbing the famous Blue Ridge Mountains, and tasting some of the delights of a genuine

experience in the wilderness. Among his companions the Southern lad went by the name of "Bob White;" and considering what his last name happened to be, it can be easily understood that nothing else in the wide world would have answered.

Of course Step Hen had another name, which was plainly Stephen Bingham. When a mite, going to school for the first time, on being asked his name by the teacher, he had spelled it as made up of two distinct words; and so Step Hen he was bound to be called by his comrades.

Giraffe also was known in family circles as Conrad Stedman; but if any boy in Cranford was asked about such a fellow, the chances were he would shake his head, and declare that the only one he knew by the name of Stedman was "Giraffe." For some time he had gone as "Rubberneck," but this became so common that the other stuck to him. Giraffe loved eating. He was also passionately fond of making fires, so that the others called him the fire fiend. When Giraffe was around no one else had the nerve to even think of starting the campfire; though after that had been done, he was willing they should "tote" the wood to keep it running.

The day was rather warm, even for up in the mountains, and if the signs told the truth they might look for a thunder storm before a great while.

As the scouts had no tents along, and were marching in very light order, they would have to depend

upon their natural sagacity to carry them through any emergencies that might arise, either in connection with the weather, or the food line. But they knew they could place unlimited dependence on their leaders; and besides, as Bob White had spent many years of his young life in this region, he must know considerable about its resources.

They were now in what is known as the Smoky Range, a spur of the Blue Ridge Mountains, which borders on Tennessee. Not a great many miles away was Asheville, a well-known resort; but few of the society people frequenting that place had ever ventured up in these lonely localities; for they did not have the best reputation possible.

Among these wild peaks dwelt men who, in spite of the efforts of revenue officers, persisted in defying the law that put a ban on the making of what has always been known as "moonshine" whiskey. Occasionally an arrest might be made; but there was much danger attached to this thing; and the country was so rugged, that it would take an army of United States regulars to clean out the nests of moonshiners holding forth there.

It would seem as though this might be a rather strange region for the hike of a Boy Scout patrol; and had the parents or guardians of the boys known as much about it as those living in Asheville, they might have thought twice before granting the lads permission to come here.

But it had been partly on the invitation of Bob White that the expedition had been planned and mapped out. He seemed to have a strange yearning to revisit the region that had been his former home; and when some one proposed that they explore some of the mysteries of the famous Blue Ridge, Bob eagerly seconded the motion, in his warm Southern way. And that was how it started. Once boys get an idea in their heads, it soon gains weight, just like a rolling snowball.

And now they were here, with the grim mountains all around them, silence wrapping them about, and mystery seeming to fill the very air. But healthy boys are not easily impressed or daunted by such things; and they cracked jokes and carried on as boys will do with the utmost freedom.

The conversation between Step Hen, Bumpus and Giraffe having attracted the attention of the scoutmaster, he called out at this juncture:

"Whose knapsack is that you've got strapped on your back right now, Number Eight?"

A shout went up as Step Hen, quickly turning the article in question around surveyed it blankly; but apparently both Bumpus and Giraffe had known of its presence all the while, though pretending ignorance.

"Who strapped that to my back?" demanded the owner. "I don't remember doing it, give you my word for it, fellers. Mighty queer how things al-

ways happen to *me,* and nobody else. But anyhow, I'm ready to continue the march, if the rest of you are."

Five minutes later, and the boys were straggling along the rough road that wound in and out, as it pierced the valleys between the peaks looming up on either side. There was no attempt at keeping order on the march, and the boys, while trying to remain within sight of each other, walked along in groups or couples.

Giraffe and Bumpus, a strange combination always, yet very good chums, were at some distance in the lead. Bringing up the rear were Thad and Allan, examining some chart of the region, which Bob White had drawn for them, and talking over what the plan of campaign should be.

In the midst of this pleasant afternoon quiet there suddenly arose the piercing notes of the bugle, followed by a loud and hoarse shout; and looking up hastily, Thad Brewster was surprised to see Bumpus wildly waving both his arms. Although he was at some little distance away, and at the bottom of the decline, what he shouted came plainly to the ears of the young scoutmaster, giving him something of a thrill:

"Hey! come along here, you fellers; Giraffe, he's got stuck in the crick, up to his knees, and he says it's quicksand!"

CHAPTER II.

SEEING GIRAFFE THROUGH.

"QUICKSAND!" shrieked Step Hen, who happened to be keeping company with Davy Jones just ahead of the two leaders of the patrol. "Hey! hurry your stumps, fellers, and get there before poor Giraffe is pulled under. Ain't it lucky he c'n stretch his neck so far? Anyhow he ought to keep his head above water."

Everybody was on the run by now, and as Bumpus kept sounding the assembly on his silver-plated bugle, what with the shouts of the advancing khaki-clad boys, the picture was an inspiring one.

When they reached the border of the little stream that crossed the mountain road, sure enough, there was the tall scout up above his knees in the water, and looking rather forlorn.

"What had I ought to do, Allan?" he bawled out, naturally appealing to the one whose practical experience was apt to be of more benefit to him at such a time than all the theories ever advanced. "You see, I was crossing here, and stopped right in the

middle to turn around and say somethin' to Bumpus. Then I found that both my feet seemed like they was glued down. When I tried to lift one, the other only sank down deeper. And it came to me like a flash that I was gripped in quicksand. When I told Bumpus here he squawked, and blew his horn to beat the band."

"Horn!" echoed Bumpus, indignantly; "why can't you ever learn to say bugle. You're the only one I know of that owns to a horn; and you blow that often enough, I'll be bound."

"Ain't you goin' to get me out?" demanded the now alarmed Giraffe, as he felt himself slowly but surely sinking deeper. "Say, is that the way to treat a fellow you all have known so long? I ain't foolin', let me tell you. And if you stand there much longer, grinnin' at me, it'll be too late! You'll feel sorry when you only see the top of my head above water. I tell you there ain't no bottom to this crick. It goes clean through to China, it does, now. Give us a hand, Allan, Thad. One scout ought to help another, you know; and I bet some of you haven't done a single good deed to-day, to let you turn your badge right-side up."

Among Boy Scouts it is considered the proper thing to invert the badge every morning, and not change its position until the owner has something worth while to his credit, even though it may only be the helping of an old man across the busy street; or

the carrying of a basket for a lame woman coming from market. This was what Giraffe evidently had in mind, when trying to spur his comrades on to helping him out of the mire into which he had fallen.

"What can be done for him, Allan?" asked the scoutmaster, turning to the other.

"Yes, think up something, Allan; and for goodness sake be quick about it," called the one in the water. "Just hear how that sucks, will you, when I work my foot up and down? And now, there, the other leg's deeper by two inches than it was. Be quick about it, or you'll be sorry."

"If there was a tree above his head I'd say get a rope over a limb, make a loop at the end, and drag him out that way," remarked Allan.

"And pull my neck longer than it is; I'm glad then there ain't no tree!" snapped the alarmed Giraffe.

"Oh! rats, he meant we'd put the loop under your arms, silly!" called out Davy.

"Some of you get hold of those old fence rails over there," Allan went on. "We can make a mattress of them, and get over to Giraffe in that way. Jump, now, boys, for he is really and truly in a bad fix; and if left alone would sure go under."

"Hurry! hurry!" shouted Giraffe, waving his long arms; "don't you hear what Allan says? It's sucking like anything. P'raps it'll open up, and pull me under before you can get started. Quick, boys!

For the love of misery stir your stumps like true scouts!"

They came running up, each bearing one of the old fence rails that had been at some time washed down the stream during a freshet. Allan took these as they arrived, and began to make a species of corduroy road out to the boy who was caught fast in the grip of the quicksand.

"Throw yourself forward as much as you can, Giraffe," he said. "Never mind about whether you soil your uniform or not. You can get a new one; but you never will have another life you know. There, rest your weight on that rail, and begin to work both feet free. When you get to lift them up, we'll lend a hand, and yank you out in a jiffy. Get busy now, Giraffe!"

And the one addressed certainly needed no second urging. He worked with a vim, and presently called out exultantly:

"She's coming now, boys; I felt both feet give that time. Oh! it's going to be all right, after all. Bumpus, I promised you my stamp book; but I reckon I'll need it a while longer myself, so consider the thing off. Please come out, and give me that lift now, Allan. Two of you can do it easy enough."

Bob White, with his usual promptness, when any one was in need of help, volunteered to assist Allan. Between them they succeeded in dragging the scout who was trapped in the quicksand, out of his un-

pleasant predicament; and while about it all of them crossed to the other side of the creek, where they were speedily joined by the balance of the patrol; though every boy took advantage of the fence rails that lay scattered through the shallow water, in order to prevent any possibility of a repetition of the disaster that had overtaken their comrade.

A halt was called, to enable Giraffe to wipe some of the mud from the lower portions of his uniform. And of course all sorts of talk passed back and forth, as might be expected among a parcel of lively boys out for a good time. Even the one so lately in dire danger had apparently gotten well over his nervous shock, for he laughed with the rest at the ludicrous nature of the event.

"Say, what kind of natives do you have down here, Bob White?" asked Bumpus.

"The same kind, I reckon, suh, that they raise in all mountain regions," came the ready reply of the sensitive Southern boy. "Some are pretty tough; but then again, I give you my word, suh, that there are others you can't beat for being the clear quill. But may I ask why you put that question to me, Bumpus?"

"Sure. There was a feller perched up on that rock stickin' out above us," declared the fat boy, pointing his finger upward along the rugged and rocky face of the mountain side; "I called to him to come and help get poor old Giraffe out; but he

never made a move; just sat there, and grinned. He had a gun along with him, and I s'pose he was a specimen of the Blue Ridge mountaineer. Gee! you ought to a seen the long white beard the old feller sported!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Bob White, looking excited, a fact that aroused the keen interest of all his comrades at once.

"Do you know who he was?" demanded the indignant Bumpus.

"I'm sorry to say, suh, that I think I do," replied the Southern boy, slowly. "If your description is correct, and believe me, I have no reason to doubt it, that man you saw must have been no other than Phin Dady!"

"Phew! ain't that the moonshiner we heard so much about over in Asheville?" asked Step Hen.

"The same man," answered Bob White, glancing a little nervously up toward the rock indicated by his comrade, and which, jutting out from the steep face of the mountain; offered a splendid outlook for any one who wished to see who might be coming along the winding road.

"Well, I don't like his ways, that's all," muttered Giraffe, who was still trying to make his uniform look half-way decent after its recent rough usage. "Anybody with one eye could see that I was bein' sucked down like fun; and for him to just watch

Bumpus here, blowin' his bugle, and shoutin' for help, without offerin' to lend a hand, wasn't—well, decent, that's what. P'raps some day it'll be my turn to grin at him when he's in trouble."

"But you wouldn't do it, you know that, Giraffe," said Thad, smiling. "You don't forget that a true scout must return good for evil. And if the time ever comes when old Phin Dady needs help that you can give, I'm dead sure you wouldn't hold back."

Giraffe grumbled some more, but the scoutmaster knew that at heart he was not an ungenerous boy, though a little inclined to hold a grudge.

"What are you thinking about, Bob White; you look as sober as though you didn't just like the looks of things any too much?" asked Allan, turning upon the other.

"That's just right, suh, I can't say that I do," replied the Southern lad. "You see, I was wondering what old Phin would think about us. He's the most suspicious man in the mountains, and with reason, suh. Foh years, now, he's been hunted high and low by the revenue agents. They've done all sorts of things trying to capture old Phin, and raid his secret still; but up to now it's never been done. He likes a revenue man like he does a rattlesnake; and I give you my word for it, suh, the next thing on his list of hates is the uniform of a soldier!"

Thad uplifted his eyebrows to indicate his surprise.

"I think I get your meaning, Bob White," he remarked, slowly and seriously. "Our uniforms might give this old moonshiner the idea that in some way we must be connected with the army; perhaps a detachment of scouts sent in here to get him in a corner, and knock his old moonshine Still, to flinders. Is that it, Bob?"

"You hit the nail on the head when you say that, suh," replied the other. "When I lived down this way, I used to hear a heap about Old Phin; and I reckon he'd know who I was if you mentioned my name to him. That's the main reason why he just sat and laughed to see the wearer of the hated uniform now used by the United States army stuck in the quicksand. I reckon he only thought that it would mean one the less enemy for the Blue Ridge moonshiners to go up against."

"It seems to me," spoke up Smithy at this juncture, "that in justice to ourselves we ought to seek an early opportunity to secure an interview with this gentleman, and explain our position. He should know that we have no relation with the army, and that in fact the mission of a Boy Scout is peace, not war."

"Second the motion, boys!" exclaimed Bumpus; "and I hope our scoutmaster will appoint a committee of three, Bob White, Allan, and, well, Smithy here, to hunt up the said gent, and show him—hey, jump out of the way there, Step Hen; the whole

side of the mountain's coming down on top of you! Hurry! hurry!"

But as the startled Step Hen hastened to obey, with considerable alacrity, Thad Brewster, looking up, saw a head withdrawn from the point whence the round stone that was rolling down the side of the steep incline must have had its start.

Jumping in zigzag curves from one side to another, the rock finally landed with a great crash in the mountain road not ten feet from where the scouts were huddled in a group, watching its coming with staring eyes.

CHAPTER III.

IN THE DESERTED LOG CABIN.

"KEEP your eyes about you!" shouted Davy Jones; "mebbe there's more where that stone came from!"

But after the rock had settled quietly in the road, silence again fell upon the scene; a little trickle of dirt glided down the face of the descent, in the track the round rock had made; but that was all.

"Whew! that's a pretty hefty stone, believe me, fellers!" cried Step Hen.

"Whatever loosened it, d'ye s'pose?" asked Giraffe, who had jumped several feet when he heard the alarm given; for his recent adventure in the bed of the treacherous stream seemed to have unnerved the tall boy, usually as brave as the next scout.

Thad stepped forward. The others saw him bend over the big rock that had just played such a queer trick, narrowly missing falling among the gathered scouts.

"Look at Thad, would you?" exclaimed Step Hen.

"What's he taking out of that crack in the rock?" Giraffe added. "Say, looks like a dirty piece of paper; and that's what it is, sure as shootin', fellers!"

"A message from the enemy; p'raps he's goin' to surrender unconditionally—ain't that the way they always put it?" Bumpus called out, in high glee.

Thad, however, after glancing down at the paper he had extracted from the crack in the rock, looked serious. Evidently to him at least it was no laughing matter.

"What does she say, Thad?" demanded Giraffe, always curious.

"Sure, if we've got any right to know, read it out, Mr. Scout Master," Bumpus echoed, in his merry way, his eyes shining with eagerness.

The scouts clustered around Thad as he once again held the scrap of soiled paper up so he could see the comparatively few words scrawled upon it with a pencil, that must have been a mere stub, since it evidently had to be frequently wet in order to make it do duty.

"It's brief, and to the point, I give you my word, boys," he said. "Here, let me hold it up, and every one of you can push in to read for yourselves. The writer believes in making his words correspond with their sound. With that for a tip you ought to be able to make it out."

And this, then, was what they read, as they

bunched together on the mountain road running through the valley of the Smoky Range:

"Beter tak my advis an skip outen this neck ov the woods. The men round heer aint gut no use fo you-uns in thes mountings. That's awl. Savvy?"

There was no signature to the communication.

"Well, that's cool, to say the least," remarked Allan, after he had read the uncouth note that had come down with the rock that fell from above.

"Tells us to turn right around, and go back," declared Giraffe, who was inclined to be peppery, and a bit rash. "Now, I like the nerve of the gent. Just as if we didn't have as much right to wander through these mountains and valleys as the next one."

"We're minding our own business, and I don't see how anybody would want to shoo us away from here," said Smithy, brushing off some imaginary specks of dust from his neat khaki uniform, always spic and span in comparison with—that of Bumpus for example, showing the marks of many a tumble.

Thad was rather puzzled himself. He knew that it would be hardly wise for a parcel of boys to deliberately defy such a notorious character as Old Phin the moonshiner, whom the Government had never been able to capture; but then again there was a natural reluctance in his boyish heart to retreat before making some sort of show with regard to carrying out their original design.

Besides, when he happened to glance toward Bob White, and saw how cruelly disappointed the Southern boy looked, Thad immediately changed his mind. Still, he wanted to hear what his comrades thought about it; since they had long gone by the wise principle that majority rules.

"Shall we take this kind advice, and go back, boys?" he asked.

A chorus of eager dissenting voices greeted his words.

"Not for Joseph, not if he knows it!" Giraffe chortled.

"We never turn back, after once we've placed our hand to the plow," remarked the pompous Smithy; and his sentiment was cheered to the echo.

"Take a vote on it, Thad," advised the sagacious Allan, knowing that if trouble came along after they had decided to continue the advance, it would be just as well to point to the fact that by an *overwhelming majority* the patrol had decided upon this rash course.

Every fellow held up his hand when Thad put the question as to whether they should continue the mountain hike. And the sad look vanished from the dark face of Bob White, as dew does before the morning sun.

So the march was immediately resumed, and nothing happened to disturb their peace of mind or body. No more rocks came tumbling down the face

of the mountain; and as the afternoon advanced they found themselves getting deeper and deeper into the heart of the uplifts.

"Wow! but this *is* a lonesome place, all right," remarked Step Hen, looking up at the lofty ridges flanking their course. "I give you my word for it I'd hate to be caught out nights alone in this gay neighborhood. If ever there was a spooky den, this is in, right here. Glad to have company; such as it is, fellers."

No one took any notice of the pretended slur. The fact was, the scouts no longer straggled along the road as before that incident of the falling rock. They seemed to feel a good deal like Step Hen expressed it, that under the circumstances it was a good thing to have company. In union there was strength; and eight boys can do a great deal toward buoying up one another's drooping courage.

"And say, looks more like a storm comin' waltzin' along than ever before," Bumpus observed, as he nodded his head toward the heavens, which were certainly looking pretty black about that time.

"Thought I heard a grumble, like thunder away off in the distance; might a been that same Old Phin Dady speakin' his mind some more, though," remarked Giraffe.

"Only a little further, suh, and we'll come to an old abandoned log cabin, unless my calculations are wrong; which ought to serve us for a shelter to-

night," was the cheering news from Bob White, who was supposed to know this country like a book.

"Bully for the log cabin!" ejaculated Bumpus, who, being heavy in build, could not stand a long hike as well as some other fellows, the tall Giraffe, for instance, whose long legs seemed just made for covering ground rapidly.

Ten minutes later Davy Jones, who had pushed to the van, gave a shout.

"There's your deserted log cabin!" he remarked, pointing. "Am I correct, Bob?"

"You surely are, suh," replied the Southerner. "And as I fail to see smoke coming from the chimney at the back, it looks to me as though nobody had got ahead of us there. If the roof only holds, we can laugh at the rain, believe me."

When the scouts hurried up to the cabin, for there was now no longer any doubt about the storm being close at hand, since lightning flashed and the grumble of thunder had changed into a booming that grew louder with every peal, they found to their great satisfaction that it seemed in a fair state of preservation, despite the fact that it must have been left to the sport of the elements for many a long year.

"Nothing wrong with this, boys," announced the scoutmaster, as they pushed inside the log house, and looked around. "And if we know half as much as we think we do, there'll be a pile of wood lying

here before that rain drops down on us. Just remember that we've got a whole night ahead."

"Hurrah! that's the ticket! Get busy everybody. We don't belong to the Beaver Patrol, but we can work just as well as if we did. Whoop her up, fellers!"

Bumpus was as good as his words. Dropping his haversack and staff in a corner, he pushed out of the door. Although the evening was being ushered in sooner than might have been expected, owing to the swoop of the storm, there was still plenty of light to see where dry wood was to be picked up for the effort. And immediately every one of the eight scouts was working furiously to bring in a good supply.

No doubt the rattle of the thunder caused the boys to hurry things; for by the time the first drops began to fall they had secured as much as they expected to use. And already there was Giraffe on his knees in front of the big fireplace that lay at the foot of the wide-throated chimney, whittling shavings with which to start a cheery blaze.

This had just started into life when the rattle of a horse's hoofs came to the ears of the boys who had clustered at the door to witness the breaking of the summer storm.

"Hey! looks like another pilgrim overtaken by the gale," said Davy Jones, as a man on horseback came riding furiously along the wretched road,

heading straight for the old cabin; as though he knew of its presence, and might indeed have found its shelter acceptable on other occasions.

He was evidently greatly astonished to find the place already occupied by a bevy of boys dressed in khaki uniforms. At first Thad thought he could see an expression akin to fear upon the thin face of the man, who seemed to be something above the average mountaineer; possibly the keeper of a country store among the mountains; or it might be a doctor; a lawyer, or a county surveyor, for he had rather a professional air about him.

Allan had immediately assured him that they were only seeking temporary shelter in the old cabin, and that he would be quite welcome to share it with them until the storm blew over, or as long as he wished to stay.

As the man, leaving his horse tied outside to take the rain as it came, pushed inside the cabin, Thad saw Bob White suddenly observe him with kindling eyes. Then to his further surprise he noticed that the Southern boy drew the rim of his campaign hat further down over his eyes, as though to keep his face from being recognized by the newcomer.

Another minute, and Bob had drawn the young scoutmaster aside, to whisper in his ear a few words that aroused Thad's curiosity to the utmost.

"That is Reuben Sparks, the guardian of my little cousin Bertha, a cruel man, who hates our whole

family. He must not recognize me, or it might spoil one of my main objects in coming down here into the Blue Ridge valleys. Warn the boys when you can, please Thad, not to mention me only as Bob White. Oh! I wonder if this meeting is only an accident; or was guided by the hand of fate?"

CHAPTER IV.

AFTER THE STORM.

THAD remembered that on several other occasions the Southern boy had mentioned the name of his little cousin, and always with a certain tender inflection to the soft voice that stamped him for one who had been born below the Dixie line.

And while Bob White had not seen fit to take his friend into his confidence it had always been plain to Thad that the other must have cherished a deep affection for the said Bertha; perhaps, since he had no sister of his own, she may have been as dear to him as one, in those times when he lived among the Blue Ridge mountains.

Before now Thad had strongly suspected that Bob had some other object in coaxing his comrades to make the pilgrimage to the Land of the Sky, besides the desire to show them its wonders. And now his own words proved it. More than that, it seemed to have some strange connection with this same little cousin, Bertha; and naturally with her legally appointed guardian, Reuben Sparks.

Thad, first of all, managed to pass the word around in a whisper, just as Bob wished it done. The boys understood that there was a reason back of the request, and expected that their comrade would take them into his confidence later on. Besides, there had really never been the slightest chance that any one of them would breathe that name of Quail in connection with Bob; indeed, most of them would have had to stop and think, if suddenly asked what his real name was, so seldom did they hear it mentioned.

The man on horseback was chatting with Allan and several others. He did not hesitate to ask questions, and was soon put in possession of the fact that they were merely the members of a Boy Scout patrol, making a strenuous hike through the Big Smoky spur of the Blue Ridge.

Thad saw that he eyed them queerly many times, as though rather doubtful whether they were giving him a straight story; but the coming of the storm soon held the attention of them all.

Just as they had expected, it was the real thing in the way of a summer storm. The lightning flashed in a way that was not only dazzling but "fearsome" as Smithy expressed it, in his elegant way. And as for the crashes of thunder that followed each and every electric current, they deafened the ears of the scouts.

A deluge of rain fell in a short time, and the

rush of water near by told that the little stream, which they had struck many times during the afternoon, had all of a sudden become a raging torrent.

Nobody was sorry when finally the racket began to subside, and the rain stopped as suddenly as it had started.

"She's done for, remarked Bumpus, in a relieved tone, as though he had been half suspecting that the stream might rise in its might, and sweep cabin, scouts and all down through the valley.

The resident of the region who had also sought shelter in the friendly cabin by the wayside, looked out first, to assure himself that his horse had come through the storm safely. Then he called out goodbye, and mounting, rode away.

"Good riddance to bad rubbish, I take it," declared Giraffe. "Whenever the fire flashed up that gent would look around the queerest way ever, as though he kind of thought we might be revenue agents playing a fine game on his friends, the moonshiners."

"Be careful what you say, Giraffe," advised the more cautious Thad. "When you're in the enemy's country you want to use soft words. Besides, you're only guessing when you say that. He was naturally curious about us. Some people would think a bunch of boys stark crazy, to try and hike through such wild country as this, when we could have taken to the good roads up in New York State, had orchards

all along the way, and good-natured farmers galore to buy milk and eggs from when we got hungry."

"I hope, suh, you won't be sorry you came down this aways," Bob White spoke up. "I take it as a great compliment, believe me, that you-all would care to keep me company when I said I felt that I just had to come back here on a visit, to see what changes there were, and do a little private business in the bargain. I'm aware of the fact that there isn't anything much worth seeing here, suh; except the untamed wilderness; but they's always plenty of excitement going around, I understand."

"I should guess yes," broke out Step Hen, "with that same Old Phin hangin' 'round with his eye on the watch for revenues. But see here, Bob, don't you think you owe us a little explanation about this racket—meaning your relations with the gent who is guardian to your sweet little cousin Bertha?"

"So say we all," chorused Davy Jones, Giraffe and Bumpus, solemnly, as they gathered around the Southern boy.

Bob White looked at their eager faces for a minute before speaking. There was something akin to real affection to be seen there as he turned his eyes from one to another of his mates. The boy from Dixie had not been in the habit of making friends easily in earlier days; but when he landed in Cranford he had soon been captivated by the sincere companionship of Thad Brewster; and when he joined

the new patrol of the scouts he quickly learned to appreciate the many good qualities that marked the other members.

"Yes, it's only fair, boys," he began, slowly yet with an evident determination to take them at least part way into his confidence; "that you should know just why I didn't want any of you to tell the name of the town we hailed from, when that man was in here. He would have recognized it as my new home, and might have suspected that I brought you all down here for a purpose."

"Which you did," interrupted Bumpus; "to admire the scenery; rough it awhile in the Land of the Sky; and show us something of your native country. If there was anything more, we didn't know it, Bob White. But we're comrades, one and all; and if we c'n do anything to help you tide over some trouble, why, you've just got to tell now."

"That is fine of you, Bumpus, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart," continued the other, strangely moved. "But let me tell you a few things first before you make such a rash promise, which I am not going to hold you to, suh. The man who was in this cabin, Reuben Sparks, is said to be the richest and meanest in these parts. It has been hinted more than a few times that he has always been thick with Old Phin Dady. But no matter how he came by his money, he is something of a miser."

"No relation of yours, I hope, then, Bob?" asked Step Hen.

"None whatever, suh," replied the other, proudly. "The Quails would never have descended to the common methods that man has practiced in order to make money. But somehow he managed to gain an influence over my Uncle Robert, after whom I was named, as you may guess, suh. When the father of Cousin Bertha died, in his will he left the child solely in the charge of Reuben Sparks, until she came of age; and he was also given control of her little fortune."

The boy ground his teeth hard together, showing how even the recollection of this moved him. But recovering his customary calmness he continued:

"She was the prettiest little thing you ever saw, suh, take my word foh it. And no boy ever thought more of his pet sister than I did of my little cousin. My father thought it a shame, and tried to get possession of her; but this Reuben Sparks had the law on his side, and all our efforts failed. After that he would never even let me see her, so great was his hatred for our family.

"One way or another we managed to exchange word, and when our folks went up Nawth to look after the mills my father had purchased before his death, I had just two letters from Bertha before something happened, and they stopped coming. Of course I supposed that her guardian had found out

about it, and fixed matters so no letter of mine—and I sent seven before owning up beaten in the game—could reach her.

"I just stood it till I couldn't sleep nights, thinking that perhaps she was being made unhappy by that cruel man. And so I made up my mind I'd come down here again, and find out the truth, if I had to steal into his house, and see Bertha without his knowing it. I wanted to tell you this before, believe me, suh," addressing Thad in particular, as the head of the patrol; while his fine eyes filled up on account of his emotion; "but somehow I couldn't bring myself to do it. And now, after hearing my story briefly, if you-all feel that it would be asking too much of my comrades to expect to have their backing in my wildcat scheme, please don't hesitate to say so, suh. I'll think just as well of you in either case."

Thad reached out, and caught the quivering hand of the Southern boy in his own.

"Why, Bob," he said, earnestly, "I think I voice the sentiments of every fellow in the patrol when I say most emphatically that we're going to stand by you through thick and thin. I'm sure you won't do anything but what is right, and what is bound to reflect credit on you as a true scout. How about that, fellows?"

"Move we make it unanimous!" cried Bumpus, instantly.

"Ay, ay! that's the ticket," exclaimed others.

"You hear what they say, Bob White?" remarked Thad, warmly.

"We'll back our comrade up, even to kidnapping the cruel guardian, and rescuing the pretty little cousin!" Smithy declared with unusual vim, for him.

"Oh!" said Bob with a smile, as he looked from one flushed face to another. "Of course I don't imagine it'll ever go that far, boys; but I thank you for this expression of your friendship. I will never forget it, suh, never while I live. And I only hope that some day in the future I may be able to repay the kindness to one and to all."

"Then I take it that this Reuben Sparks does not live a great way beyond where we happen to be camped right now?" remarked Allan.

"I expected to show you the place sometime to-morrow, suh. It is worth seeing, upon my word," replied Bob.

"Now I know that there's a whole lot of truth in that old saying about the devil taking care of his own," Giraffe mentioned. "The rest of you heard Reuben say he had been tempted to stop under that big tree we passed on the way here; but on second thoughts decided to come along to the cabin. When that one terrible crack came he got as white as a sheet, and told me he believed that that very tree must have been struck. Where would Reuben have

been if he'd stayed there? Kind of scattered around the landscape, I guess."

Thad had just started to say that it was time they thought about getting some supper, when he was interrupted in a most disagreeable manner. Indeed, for the moment all idea of ever wanting to eat again in this world vanished from his mind; for something occurred that caused the scouts to rush toward the end of the cabin where the chimney stood, and catch hold of each other in sudden terror and dismay.

CHAPTER V.

THE JONES BOY COMES TO GRIEF AT LAST.

THERE was a rumbling sound, not unlike the roar of a heavy freight train coming down the grade of a mountain. All of the scouts plainly felt the cabin quiver as though in the throes of an earthquake.

Then succeeded a crash, as the further end was knocked out. For a moment Thad really feared they were done for, and his very heart seemed to stand still with dread. Then, as the awful sounds died away, save for the patter of small stuff on the cabin roof, he breathed naturally again.

Whatever it was that had happened, no one had been hurt; and at least they could find consolation in this.

"It's an earthquake!" exclaimed Bumpus, being the very first to recover the use of his voice.

"A landslide, you mean!" echoed Giraffe, contrary minded.

"Thad, you say?" asked Step Hen; just as though the leader could determine the nature of the calamity better than any one else.

"I think Giraffe struck it about right," Thad answered.

"You mean part of the hillside caved away?" further questioned Bumpus.

"Must have been the whole mountain top, by the racket it kicked up," Davy Jones grumbled; "say, my heart turned upside down; and I'll have to stand on my head to get it to working again the right way."

"And look at what it did to our snug old cabin; tore the whole end off!" observed Step Hen, ruefully. "Now, if it happened to be a cold night, why, we'd just be freezing to death, that's what. Anybody seen my cap around; my hair stood up on end with the scare, and I must have dropped it? Thank you, Allan, for picking it up. I do have the worst luck about losing my things you ever saw."

"Seems to me," remarked Allan, soberly, "that instead of complaining the way you fellows are doing, we ought to be mighty thankful it wasn't any worse."

"Yes, that's what I was thinking," Smithy added, as he let go Allan's arm, which he must have unconsciously gripped in his sudden fright; "what if we had run to that end of the cabin, things would look somewhat different right now."

"Ugh! guess that's right," Giraffe admitted; "and for one I ain't goin' to make any more complaint. But what under the sun was it hit us?"

"A big rock must have dropped down from the side of the mountain, and tore out the end of the old cabin," Thad explained. "It came on this night of all nights, just when we happened to be camped here. And the cabin has stood unharmed for as much as thirty years, Bob White says."

"I call that queer, now," said Bumpus.

"It's more than that, Bumpus," Smithy remarked, in his most mysterious manner; "I'd call it highly significant, if you asked my opinion."

"Wow! listen to that, would you?" exclaimed Step Hen, shuddering again. "He means that the rock was smashed down by somebody who wanted to chase us out of this region. And that must be our old friend, Phin Dady, the moonshiner!"

Thad bent down, and proceeded to light a handy little lantern which one of the boys had carried for emergencies.

"I'm going to take a look out, and see what struck us," he remarked.

"Be careful, Thad," warned Allan; "another rock might follow the first."

"And if you hear the least suspicious sound, jump for all that's out," added Bumpus, ready to admire the nerve of one who could face danger so readily, even though not capable of imitating Thad's example himself.

"Oh! I reckon there's little chance of anything like that happening," the other sent back, with a

little laugh, as though he wanted to cheer his chums up; "you know, they say lightning never strikes in the same place twice. It's taken thirty years for a rock to hit this cabin, though plenty must have slid down the side of the mountain in that time. Be back in a jiffy, boys."

With that he stepped out of the door, which had been burst open when the log structure received such a terrific jolt. The other boys clustered there by the revived fire, exchanging views, and waiting for the return of those who had gone outside; for Bob White had silently followed Thad, as though he felt that since it was through his invitation that the scouts were placed in this predicament, he ought to do everything in his power to ease the strain.

When they entered again in less than ten minutes, of course a bombardment of eager questions saluted them.

"Slow up, fellows," Thad said, laughingly. "If I tried to answer you all, I'd be apt to get my tongue twisted some, and that's a fact. Yes, it *was* a rock that did the damage, just as we guessed. It rolled down from somewhere above; but we could only guess at that, it's so dark out there. And after taking a look at the size of the same, Bob and myself made up our minds we had reason to be mighty thankful that it only touched the end of the cabin, instead of hitting it square in the center."

"But whoever started it rolling?" demanded

Bumpus; and it was evident from the way the others waited to hear what Thad would say to this, that they laid great stress on the answer.

"Well," returned the other, soberly," of course we couldn't make dead certain, but after seeing the heft of that rock we believed that it was never started by any human hands. The rain and storm must have undermined it."

Bumpus heaved a big sigh of relief.

"Well," said he, "I'm glad of that. It's bad enough to think you're bein' bombarded by rocks that just take a silly notion to drop when we come along; but it'd be a heap sight worse if the men of the Big Smokies were throwing such pebbles at us, haphazard. Whew! I'm hungry, fellers; who says grub?"

That was just like a boy, to remember his natural appetite right on the heels of the greatest fright of his whole life. And as the others admitted to feeling somewhat the same way, there ensued a bustle to see how soon supper could be gotten ready.

The members of the Silver Fox Patrol were no longer greenhorns, though one or two of them gave evidence that they had not yet graduated from the tenderfoot class. They had learned a great deal about the things that are connected with a camp life, because they had spent some time under canvas on Lake Omega, which lay not many miles from their home town.

And then again, Thad had belonged to a troop of scouts before coming to Cranford; while, as for Allan, he had been through the mill so often up in Maine and elsewhere, that he was, as Bumpus declared, a "walking edition of what to do, and what not to do when in the woods."

It is true that on this big hike through the mountains they were compelled to travel very light, and would miss many of the things that had added greatly to their comfort on that other occasion. But then it was their desire to learn how to rough it, taking the knocks with the good things.

By this time some of the lads were beginning to believe that they would rub up against plenty of the "knocks" all right; especially if things kept on as they had commenced since striking this wonderful "Land of the Sky."

The supper put them in something like their customary good humor. Indeed, as they sat around the fire afterwards, Bumpus was induced to sing several of their school songs, so that the whole of them might join in the rollicking chorus. Strange sounds indeed to well up out of that valley, so lately the theater of a war between the elements, as lightning and rain vied with each other to produce a panic in the breasts of these same boys who now sang and joked as though they had not a care in the world.

Only Bob White remained very quiet. Thad often glanced toward the Southern lad, with sympathy in

his look. He could easily understand that, with their arrival in this mountainous region, where the other had spent many of his earlier years, old memories must be revived, some pleasant, and possibly others of a disagreeable nature.

Finally they agreed that it would be wise to get some sleep, as another day lay before them. And accordingly, in the customary fashion, the bugler sounded "taps," and each scout tried to find a soft board, upon which he might rest his weary body during the hours that must elapse before dawn arrived.

A watch was kept up, one fellow taking an hour at a time, and then arousing the next on the list; so that at no time was the cabin unguarded while the night slowly passed.

But nothing happened to disturb the scouts; and as morning came at last they began to get up and stretch, rubbing their limbs as though the hard bed had not been the nicest thing possible. But there was little grumbling. They had learned to take things as they came; which is one of the finest results of Boy Scout experience. The philosophy of the woods teaches that in the very start—try for the best results; but after you have done your best, accept the situation with cheerfulness.

Again the notes of the bugle sounded the "assembly," as breakfast was declared ready; and half an hour later they left their shelter of the night.

"Good-bye old cabin!" sang out Bumpus, waving his fat hand back toward the wrecked log house; "you treated us pretty decent after all, and we'll never forget you. Long may you wave, and offer shelter to other pilgrims storm chased!"

As the sun climbed above the rim of the encircling mountains the spirits of the boys mounted in proportion. Davy Jones was up to his usual pranks, being hard to control. They would miss him for a short time, only to hear a whoop; and looking up, discover the acrobatic boy hanging by his knees, or it might be his toes, from the limb of a tree, thirty feet or more above the ground.

Thad knew from experience that it was next to impossible to restrain the Jones boy; he must have his frolic out; and so they only laughed at his antics, and wondered what next the daring Davy would attempt.

Ten minutes later he was seen standing on his head on the edge of what appeared to be a deep ravine or gulch, and kicking his heels in the air.

All sorts of dire things had always been predicted as going to overtake Davy sooner or later, unless he gave up these venturesome pranks; and this time it actually looked as though they were about to be fulfilled. For even as the seven other scouts were watching his antics, the earth at the edge of the gully appeared to suddenly give way.

Davy vanished from their view, the last thing

they saw of him being his uptilted heels, waving what seemed to be a frantic farewell.

With cries of alarm the scouts rushed forward, fearful as to what they would see.

CHAPTER VI.

MORE SIGNS OF TROUBLE AHEAD.

"OH! did you see him kick his heels at us as he went down?" gasped Bumpus, as they hurried forward to the spot where the venturesome scout had vanished so forlornly; "I'll never forget it, never! Just like the poor old chap wanted to say 'good-bye boys!'"

Bumpus was too honest and warm hearted a fellow to say this with any intention of being hilarious. He sincerely felt every word of it.

Of course the long-legged Giraffe had to be the first to arrive on the scene of the late tragedy. Thad felt constrained to call out to him in warning.

"Be careful there, Giraffe, or else there may be another of us down in that pocket. Look out for your footing, I tell you!"

The other had dropped flat on his chest. He was seen to stretch his neck in the endeavor to get the best results with a minimum of risk; and they did say that when Giraffe really and truly did his prettiest in this respect he could cover more territory than any one else ever seen.

"Oh! is he smashed flatter'n a pancake?" asked Step Hen, as he drew near, with his melancholy face looking longer than usual; and the whites of his eyes showing strongly, as they always did when he was frightened.

Giraffe twisted his head around with the utmost ease; indeed, from the length of his neck it looked as though he might continue the turning movement until he had actually made a complete revolution.

And when Thad caught sight of the grin on his face he felt immediately relieved; for surely Giraffe loving fun as much as he did, would not allow this smirk to decorate his angular countenance unless there seemed little danger.

Another minute, and all of them were ranged there along the edge of the gully, staring down at Davy Jones. It would seem that the other had been agile enough to clutch hold of a small tree that jutted out from the steep slope. He was hanging to it now, and straining the best he knew how to fling his legs upward, so as to relieve the situation, and the terrific pull on his arms.

He looked upward toward the row of faces peeping over the edge above; and there was a humorous grin on his face. He knew what his comrades were doubtless thinking about "the pitcher that went once too often to the well;" and that their natural alarm having passed, they would see only the humorous side of the affair.

Again did Davy strain. There was something connected with the way he was hanging there that seemed to prevent him from accomplishing the result he wanted to attain. For the first time they could remember the boys saw that the gymnast and acrobat of the troop had certainly met his match. Left to himself he would surely have had to invent some other method for drawing himself up on to the slender horizontal trunk of the little tree; or else let go, and drop.

As it was a matter of some twenty feet or so to the bottom of the gully; and the chances were that he might receive any number of bad scratches while making the transit, Davy of course would be averse to trying this plan.

"Guess you'll have to lend me a hand this time, boys," he called out, when once more he failed to make connection between his squirming legs and the body of the tree.

"Who'll go down, and yank him on to that tree?" asked Bumpus; knowing full well at the same time that no one could have the nerve to ask a fellow of his heft, when there were so many others better fitted for the task.

"Don't all speak at once!" advised the hanging Davy.

Somehow all eyes were turned toward Giraffe. As the most agile of the lot, he might be expected to volunteer; and yet with not a particle of footing

between the top of the bank and that tree, some ten feet down, the job was hardly one that might appeal to any scout, however nimble.

"Oh! you needn't look at me that way," he complained; "because I'm long, and active, you just think I c'n stretch that far; but it's a mistake. But if somebody *has* to try and make the riffle, I s'pose it'll be me."

He started to take off his knapsack as he said this, when Thad stopped him.

"Wait, Giraffe," said the patrol leader, quietly; "perhaps, after all, nobody has to go down after Davy. You seem to forget, all of you, that we've got a stout rope along with us. What's the need of carrying such a thing, if it can't help us out in a pinch?"

"Bully! Sure we've got a rope, and a dandy one at that!" cried Bumpus, growing so excited that he came near falling over the edge, and had to clutch hold of the nearest scout to steady himself.

"If you'd gone that time, Bumpus, think what a splash you'd have made down there. Because Davy got hold of a tree don't think you could do the same. It'll have to be a whopping big one that could bear up under *your* weight, all right," said Step Hen, who chanced to be the one whom the fat boy had caught hold of in his sudden alarm.

It turned out that Bob White was carrying the rope. He had it wound around his body in a way

Allan had shown him, so that it did not interfere with his movements, and was not coming loose all the time.

Quickly then was it unwound. In order to hasten this, the boys even began to turn Bob around like a teetotum, until he said he was dizzy.

"Lucky it's got a loop handy at the end," remarked Allan, as he took the rope, and sought a position directly above the hanging scout.

"How is it, Davy?" he asked, while lowering the noose.

"If you mean how much longer I could stand it, I'd say not a big lot," replied the one addressed. "You see, the old tree cuts my hands just fierce; and I've been twisting around here so long now that I'm gettin' tired. How're you goin' to fix it, Allan? Might toss the loop over my head; but I'm afraid my neck wouldn't hold out. If it was Giraffe now——"

"Here, you just let up on Giraffe, and pay attention to what Allan's goin' to tell you; hear?" called out the party mentioned.

"Do you think you could hold on with one arm, and get the other through the loop?" continued the Maine boy. "Of course, if you can't, why, I might swing it around, and you could somehow stick your feet through; when we'd drag the loop up under your arms. How about that, Davy?"

But Davy made a test, and declared that one hand

would hold him for a brief time. So, in this way, the rope was finally placed under both arms, and tightened.

"Now, get hold here, fellows, and give a pull!" said Allan; "hold on, not so rough about it, Giraffe, or you'll rub his face against the rocks and make it worse than if he'd let go, and dropped down. Here he comes, boys!"

"Heave ho!" sang out the scouts, and foot by foot they drew the unlucky acrobat once more to the surface.

"Got off pretty slick that time, eh, Davy?" demanded Step Hen, after the other had been landed, and Bob White was coiling the rope around himself again.

"Never knew me to miss doin' that, did you, Step Hen?" queried the other; and from the flippant tone in which he said this it was plainly evident that the lesson had been lost on him; and that Davy would be doing his customary stunts right along.

The hike was presently resumed, and the little adventure reckoned a thing of the past. Shortly afterwards they came suddenly on a man, with an old vehicle, and a slab-sided horse that looked half starved. The ramshackle wagon bed was covered to about the depth of three feet with poor looking straw, that seemed to have done duty a long time.

As for the man himself, he was a typical mountaineer, thin and scrawny, with a small, weasened

face, and keen, snapping eyes. Bob White instantly pulled his hat down over his face as he saw the man.

Thad noticed that the other looked alarmed at sight of these eight khaki-clad boys strung out along the mountain road. Indeed, he had the appearance of a man who would have turned and fled, only that he was afraid to do so after finding himself face to face with what looked like a squad of United States regulars, or at the least, North Carolina militia, on the hike.

He returned the greetings of the boys with sundry nods of his head, and urged his old nag along by several whacks from the hickory rod he held in his hand in lieu of a whip. So ramshackle vehicle and scared driver vanished around the bend which had concealed the scouts from his view until it was too late to run.

"Looked like he'd seen a ghost!" suggested Step Hen, with a chuckle.

"Well, you can't blame him, if he saw *you* roll your eyes, and make that face of yours look like thirty cents," remarked Bumpus, cuttingly.

"He had mountain dew hidden under that straw," remarked Bob White; "I remember the old fellow right well, and I'm glad he was that frightened he didn't think to take at look at me. Nate Busby is his name. He always was connected with Old Phin, and the others who make the moonshine stuff further up in the hills. Right now, you can believe

me, suh, he's on his way with that load, to hide it where somebody from town can find it."

"He don't know what to make of us, seems like?" suggested Giraffe.

"That is the truth, added Thad. "I thought his eyes would drop out, he stared so hard. Seemed to me as if he actually expected some of us to surround him, and examine his load. How he did whip that old nag of his. The beast knicked up his heels, and galloped, perhaps for the first time in years."

All of them laughed as they went on, talking by the way. Boys can discover a ludicrous side to almost anything. Good health, absence of worry, and plenty of food are about all they require; and the world looks its brightest.

Sometimes, when Thad glanced toward the Southern boy, he wondered whether Bob had taken them wholly into his confidence on the last evening when he told them about his life amid the mountains and valleys of the Blue Ridge Range. It struck him that Bob frowned too often to indicate a clear conscience.

"There's something else on his mind, and that's certain," Thad was saying to himself. "He keeps looking in my direction every little while, and I wouldn't be surprised if he came over pretty soon to tell me something he's been keeping back. But it don't matter; we'll stand behind Bob all the time.

He's a fine fellow, as true as gold; and one scout should always help another in trouble."

His reflections were interrupted by Bumpus, who edged over nearer the patrol leader to impart the information that, happening to look back, he had discovered some one thrusting his head out from behind a rock, as though he might be following in their wake!

CHAPTER VII.

THE MESSAGE OF THE SPLIT STICK.

A TEMPORARY halt had been called, and the scouts were consulting as to what this new development might mean.

"Sure you saw a man, are you, Bumpus?" asked Giraffe, as though he had an idea the stout boy might have deceived himself. "'Twa'n't a rolling stone, now, I take it? Or it couldn't have been a frisky little 'coon' or 'possum,' I suppose?"

"Well, what d'ye think I've got eyes for, if I don't know a biped when I see one?" retorted Bumpus, indignantly. "He was as plain as anything; and makin' from one pile of rocks to another. You go with me back there, and I'll show you, Giraffe. Then you'll believe me when I say a thing."

The two boys made a move as if to carry out this project, only the scoutmaster put a stop to it.

"Don't think of doing that, fellows," Thad said, quickly. "These mountaineers are a thin-skinned lot, as far as I've been able to learn; and they won't

stand for any poking of your nose into their business. Besides, if it was a man, the chances are he would be armed, and you might bring a hornet's nest down about our ears."

"Oh! he did have a gun, all right," remarked Bumpus, carelessly.

"You didn't mention that before," broke in Step Hen, with an intaking of breath that betrayed excitement.

"'Cause nobody asked me; and every one wanted to have something to say," retorted the other. "It was a gun, and an *awful* wicked looking one too, about as long as my staff, seemed to me."

"Could it have been Old Phin?" suggested Allan.

"How about that, Bumpus; was he an old man with a gray beard?" asked Thad.

"Nixey; that is I don't know how old he might a been; but I'm dead sure he didn't have any beard at all, just a smooth face. But he was a regular mountaineer, all right, Thad, with the dingy old faded brown homespun clothes, the slouch hat, and the ragged pants that never came near his brogans. He saw me lookin' at him, for he put on a little spurt, and dodged behind that pile of rocks, where like as not he's squattin' right now, waitin' to see what we're agoin' to do about it, and ready to speak to us with that trusty weapon if we try to rush his fort."

"Well, we're going to do nothing of the kind, just remember that," said Thad, resolutely. "It's

only natural that the men of these mountains should feel a whole lot of curiosity about us. I suppose now they never heard of the Boy Scouts; and these uniforms make them think we're connected with the army. Now, we don't want to stir them up any more than we can help. They're an ugly lot, Bob here says, if you rub the fur the wrong way. We didn't come down here to bother these moonshiners one whit; and if they'll only let us alone, we want to keep our hands off their affairs. Let the fellow dodge after us if he wants to; he'll find that we're only a bunch of happy-go-lucky boys, off for a holiday."

"Pity we can't meet up with that same old Phin, and tell him as much," Smithy went on to say.

"Perhaps it might be managed easy enough," Allan observed, and all of them immediately turned toward him, feeling that he had some scheme to communicate.

"Open up, and tell us what it is, Allan," urged the impatient Bumpus.

"Yes, don't keep us guessing any more than you can help," added Step Hen. "We've sure got enough to worry us, what with the troubles of Giraffe getting stuck in that quicksand; and Davy here, falling over every old precipice he can find, without you making us puzzle out a problem. How could it be done, Allan?"

"Why, we'll send Old Phin a letter," replied the other, calmly.

"Show me your messenger, then!" demanded Bumpus.

Allan picked up a stick, and deliberately split one end so that he could open it up. This he thrust into a crevice in the rocks close to the wretched road, and in such a position that it was certain to meet the eye of the tracker when he again started to follow them.

"Now, I'll write a few lines, and leave it here, addressed to Phin Dady," he went on. "I'll print the words in capitals, in the hopes that the old mountaineer may be able to read as much as that. If he can't, then some other of the clan may; and if all else fails, they'll have some boy or girl make it out. How's that, Thad?"

"Splendid, I should say," replied the scoutmaster, smiling. "Here, Bumpus, turn around, and bend over."

"What you goin' to do to me?" demanded the short scout, suspiciously, as he hesitated before complying.

"Is that the way you obey orders?" scoffed Giraffe. "A true scout should never ask questions. S'pose them dragoons at the battle of the Six Hundred had begun to want to know the whys and wherefores of everything, d'ye think we'd ever had

any chance to declaim that stirring pome? Shame on you, Bumpus, take a brace, and obey blindly."

"Oh! I only want the use of your broad and steady back for a writing desk, so Allan can get his message written," Thad at this interesting juncture remarked, easing the strain, and dissipating all the fat boy's suspicions.

When Allan had made out to complete his "message" he read it aloud, and also let them all have a look at it. Just as he had said he would do, he had written it in the most primitive way possible, by making capitals of each letter. This was what he had done:

"Phin Dady—We are a patrol of Boy Scouts, come down from the North to see the Carolina mountains. We do not mean you, or any one, harm; but want to be friends. We carry no arms but a single shotgun."

"That ought to answer the purpose," remarked Thad, approvingly.

"I didn't want to say too much, you see," observed the author of the message, as he fastened it in the crotch of the riven stick, where it must attract the attention of any one passing. "First, I had a notion to mention Bob's name, as a former resident; and then I remembered that he said he didn't want it known he'd come back. So I left that out."

"And I'm glad you did," said the one in question,

hastily; "it would have done no good, suh, believe me; and might have brought us into much trouble."

Again Thad saw him send that expressive glance his way; and his suspicions concerning Bob having another secret which he had not as yet told, received further confirmation.

"This, you know, fellows," remarked Allan, "is the way the Indians communicated in the old days; only instead of writing it out as we do, they used to make signs that stood for men, camp-fires, rivers, woods, animals, trails and such things. You remember, Thad here gave us some talk about that awhile back. Now, are we going on again, since we've left our wonderful message for Old Phin?"

"Yes, and perhaps we'd better keep somewhat closer together than we've been doing up to now," the scoutmaster suggested.

"How'd it do for Giraffe here to stay behind, and watch to see if that feller back of the rock pile gets the letter?" Bumpus proposed. "After we turned that bend ahead he could drop down, and creep back. Then, after he'd seen all he wanted, why it wouldn't be any great shake for such a long-legged feller to overtake the rest of the bunch."

But Giraffe evidently did not like the idea of being left all by himself after that fashion. He looked worried as he waited to see what Thad would say; and was considerably relieved when the other shook his head, remarking:

"No need of that, Number Three. It wasn't such a bad idea though, come to think of it, and does you credit. I'm glad to see that you're waking up, and beginning to work your brain more. But that message will get into the hands of Old Phin, all right, there's no doubt of that."

"D'ye reckon he'll take our word for it; or believe it's only one more clever dodge of the revenue men to get him when he's napping?" asked Davy Jones.

The scoutmaster turned to Bob White.

"How about that, Bob?" he asked.

"Old Phin is narrow minded, as you can easily understand," the Southern boy replied. "Besides, he's had so many smart dodges played on him, that he'll never believe anybody's word. Now, he may make up his mind that because we're only boys he neen't be afraid we expect to capture him; but all the same, we might poke around here, meaning to destroy his Still, suh. You can depend upon it that Old Phin'll never make friends with any one that wears a uniform. That stands for an enemy in his eyes. But I'm hopin' suh, that he'll just conclude to let us alone, and go to one of his mountain hide-outs, to stay till we leave the neighborhood."

They were by now tramping along again. Trying to forget the ugly part of the affair, Thad was picturing in his mind what the home of Reuben Sparks might be like. He was a rich man, Bob had said, and in close touch with the moonshiners; though

the Government had never been able to connect him with any of the illicit Stills that had been raided from time to time during the last dozen years. And so it was only natural to believe that he must have surrounded himself with some of the comforts of civilization, while remaining in this wild region. Words let fall by Bob had given Thad this impression; as though they were going to be surprised when the home of little Cousin Bertha was come upon.

"I'd like to have a little talk with you, Thad!"

The scoutmaster was not very much surprised when he heard these words, and realized that Bob White had caught up with him as he strode along at the head of the little squad of boys in khaki.

"He just couldn't hold in any longer," was what Thad whispered to himself; "and now he's bound to let down the bars all the way, so somebody will share his secret with him."

Turning upon the other, he said, pleasantly:

"Why, as many as you like, Bob; what's bothering you now; for I've seen you looking my way quite some time, as though you wanted to speak. I guess you'll feel better when you've had it out."

"Perhaps I may, suh, though I'm ashamed to have kept it from you so long," answered the Southern boy, shame-facedly. "Fact is, I tried to deceive myself into thinking that it couldn't interest or concern any of my chums. But now, since I've

been thinking it all over, and we've run across Old Phin, it looks different to me, and I'm of the opinion I had ought to have mentioned this before I took the lot of you down into these danger mountains!"

Thad knew then that it could be no trifling thing that would agitate the other as this seemed to do, and he steadied himself to meet the disclosure.

CHAPTER VIII.

BOB CONFIDES IN THE PATROL LEADER.

"WHAT I want to tell you about is—my father," said Bob, swallowing something that seemed to be sticking in his throat; as though the mere mention of his dead parent had the power to affect him so.

"Yes?" Thad said, encouragingly, wondering at the same time how one who had passed to the other side several years now, could have any sort of connection with the mission of the scouts to this region.

"You'll perhaps understand, suh," continued Bob, getting a firmer grip on himself; "when I mention the fact that my father, for a year or so before he was taken, had filled the office of United States Marshal for this district."

"Oh!" exclaimed Thad, beginning to see light now.

"He was induced to take the office by the President himself, who was a personal friend of my father," the boy went on, proudly; "and having given his word, nothing could make him back out.

Up to then we had lived at peace with everybody in these mountains; but of course that was bound to come to an end after he had sworn to do his duty; which was to send out his agents to destroy all the secret Stills, and bring in the law breakers, if they could be found."

"He must soon have had the enmity of Old Phin, and every other moonshiner about the Big Smokies," Thad remarked, the other having paused, as though to give him a chance to express an opinion.

"That is just what happened, suh," Bob went on, hurriedly, as, having broken the ice, he wanted to get through as speedily as possible. "After he had led several successful raids in person, the mountaineers saw that they had a different man to deal with from the other old marshal. They sent him terrible warnings of what was going to happen to him if he kept up his work; but my father was a Quail; and he didn't know the meanin' of the word fear, suh."

"Were you and your mother living near here all that time, Bob?" asked the scoutmaster. "Because, I should have thought she might have been worried for fear some of those desperate men tried to stop your father's work by burning down his home, or doing something like that?"

"There were threats made, suh, to that effect; and my father moved his family to Asheville to feel that we would be all safe. Then there came a

dreadful day for us, when my father never came back, after he had gone into these mountains to arrest another batch of moonshiners, whose Still had been located. One of the men who had accompanied him told us he had seen him shot down. They were surrounded by bushwhackers, and the rifles were popping all about, so they had to leave him there. He was surely dead, they claimed, before they fled from the spot, and of course, suh, they could not burden themselves with his body."

Again Bob White paused to gulp down the obstacle in his throat.

"Now, you are wondering, suh, how it happened that when we came to Cranford there was a gentleman with us who was called Mr. Quail, and supposed to be my father. That was my father's twin brother, living in Philadelphia. He kindly offered to stay with my mother, who never goes out at all, until we became settled. Her mother, my grandmother, had left me a heap of stock in the bank and mills of Cranford; and as it was very unpleasant for my mother down this aways, after father went, she had determined to locate up yondah."

"And does she know about you coming down here?" asked Thad, suspiciously, as if he feared that the other might have deceived the only parent he had left; this bringing a tragedy of the grim mountains so close home to them had given the scout leader considerable of a thrill, for after all,

despite his courage and grit, Thad was only a boy.

Bob drew himself up proudly, and his black eyes flashed.

"I would sooner cut off my right hand, suh, than deceive my mother," he said. "And, so you may understand the whole thing, I must tell you what a strange longin' I've been hugging to my heart these two years back. It is this. What if, after all, my father was *not* dead at the time his men saw him fall; what if these moonshiners have kept him a prisoner somewhere in these mountains all this while, meanin' to punish him because he had given them all so much trouble!"

"That's a stunning shock you've given me, Bob," said Thad, drawing a long breath; "but see here, is it just a wild wish to have it so; or have you any reason to believe such a thing; any foundation for the theory, in fact?"

"I'll tell you, suh," Bob went on, feverishly. "A man came to me one day, and said he had been sent by one of the revenues who had been with my father that sad time, to tell me what he had picked up in the mountains. There were rumors going around that somewhere deep in the mountains, at one of the secret Stills, the moonshiners kept a prisoner at work. Some said it must be one of the revenue men who had disappeared; and that the moonshiners were bent on making him work up the mash, as a sort of punishment for having done them so much

damage when he was in the employ of the Government."

"I see; and of course you jumped to the conclusion that it might be your own father, alive and well, though held a prisoner of the moonshiners?"

"Both my mother and myself believed there might be just a little chance that way. She was in bad health, and put it all in my hands. We have never said a word about it to anybody in Cranford. While I have been going to school with the rest of the boys in Cranford, all the time I was in correspondence with one of the Government revenue agents, and paying him to be on the constant watch for any positive signs. He died six months ago, and just when he had begun to think he was getting on a warm scent."

"I see," said Thad, as the other paused, overcome with emotion; "and ever since then you've been longing to get down here again, to find out for yourself if it *could* be true. I don't blame you the least bit, Bob. And I only hope that you'll be able to learn the truth, even if it dashes all your hopes. Whatever we can do to help, you can count on. Scouts have to be like brothers, you know. It's a part of our regulations to help any one in trouble; and that applies stronger than ever when it's a fellow scout."

"Oh! thank you, Thad!" exclaimed the warm-hearted Southern lad, as he squeezed the hand of

his companion almost fiercely. "I had no right to influence you to come down here. It is a dangerous place. Right now I ought to beg you and the rest to back out, and leave me to fight my battles alone. But somehow I just can't find the grit to do that. I reckon, suh, I'm too selfish. I'm right ashamed of myself at this minute to feel such satisfaction in the grip of your hand."

"Of course," continued wise Thad, "this old moonshiner, Phin Dady, might still have it in for you, as one of the Quail family."

"As far as that is concerned, suh, I'm not bothering my head, I assuah you. I'd just as lief face Old Phin, and snap my fingers under his nose. My idea in wanting to keep him from seeing me was along another line, suh. He would be apt to think 'like father, like son;' and that I had hired out to the Government to find where his Still lay, so it could be raided. No man has ever done that; Old Phin declares they never will."

"If these mountaineers begin to get bothersome it might interfere some with that other little affair you spoke about?" suggested Thad, as they continued to walk on in company.

"That's what I'm afraid of, suh," replied Bob White; "but I'm hoping for the best."

Some of the others happening to push up about that time brought the confidential conversation to a

close. But surely the young scout leader had plenty to ponder over as he walked on.

The hike through the Blue Ridge, which they had looked forward to simply as a test of endurance, and to develop their knowledge of woodcraft, threatened to turn into a tragic affair. At least, it was no child's play; and if they came out of it without any serious accident happening to any of their number, they would be deserving of great credit.

But if Thad and Bob White were in a serious frame of mind, the same could hardly be said of several other members of the patrol. Giraffe, Step Hen and Bumpus seemed to be fairly bubbling over with good humor. Some boys can no more control their spirits than they can their appetites.

As usual Step Hen suddenly discovered, while they were halting for a breathing spell, that he was minus something. The evil spirits had evidently been at work again, when he was off his guard, and succeeded in abstracting part of his personal property. It really was a shame how they beset that unlucky fellow.

"If it don't just beat the Dutch what happens to me?" he was heard to loudly wail, looking around him in a helpless way.

"What's the matter now, Step Hen?" asked Allan; although he knew full well what sort of an answer he must receive.

"They've been and done it some more," replied the disturbed scout, helplessly.

The trouble was, that whenever he missed anything Step Hen always ran around looking in all the places that no sensible person would ever dream of examining. When Giraffe declared that he was like an old hen with its head taken off, it just about fitted the case.

"What's gone this time?" continued the boy from Maine, with a smile at the way Step Hen was turning over small stones, and stirring the leaves with his foot, as if he really expected a miracle to be wrought, and to find a bulky object that way.

"That little kodak I fetched along; you know I had it wrapped so carefully in a waterproof cloth, and tied with top cord. Now it's gone! Needn't spring that old story on me, and say I was careless. P'raps I have been a few times; but right now I'm dead sure the fault ain't mine. Somebody's playing a joke on me. Mind, I ain't mentioning no names; but I've got my suspicions."

He looked hard at Giraffe, and the accusation could hardly have been given in plainer language than that. But Giraffe was used to being unjustly accused. There were occasions when he did seize upon a golden opportunity to hide something belonging to his comrade, because it had been left carelessly around; and Giraffe believed it a part of his duty to break the other of such shiftless habits.

But on this occasion he held up both hands, declaring solemnly:

"Give you my word for it I never touched any camera. This time you've either been and dropped it on the road; or else the Gold Dust Twins have nabbed it on you."

Just then Bumpus, who had been wandering aimlessly about after drinking at the cooling waters of the little spring that had been the main cause of this temporary halt in the march, gave utterance to a loud exclamation.

He had tripped over something that lay in the grass, and a splash announced that with his usual hard luck the fat boy had managed to go headlong into the spring. Scrambling out, with the water streaming from his red face, he turned indignantly on the balance of the patrol, now convulsed with laughter.

"What sort of—horse play d'ye call that—I'd like to know?" he sputtered, trying to wipe his streaming face with a handkerchief that looked far too small for the task. "Can't a feller—just stroll around camp—without some silly putting out a foot, and tripping him up? Tell me that, now?"

"I'm beginning to think we must have some sort of a hoodoo along with us," remarked Smithy, anxiously. "All sorts of things seem to be happening, and in the most mysterious way possible. We all know that there wasn't a single fellow anywhere

near Bumpus when he pitched forward. Yet he says *somebody* put out a foot, and he tripped over it. I think it a remarkable phenomenon, for a fact, and worth investigating."

"Well, somethin' *did* trip me, and that's sure," grumbled the other, possibly thinking that he had been too sweeping in his accusation.

"Suppose you look in that bunch of grass, and find out if the little evil spirit that's playing all these pranks on you is lying there?" suggested Thad, with a twinkle in his eye, as though he could give a pretty shrewd guess what the result of the said exploration would turn out to be.

So Bumpus, always willing to oblige, especially since his own curiosity must have been aroused, proceeded forthwith to get down on his hands and knees, and begin an examination of the tangle in question.

Half a minute later he gave a loud cry. At the same time he was seen to hold up some strange black object.

"Look! Bumpus has caught his little evil genius!" cried Giraffe. "And ain't it a hard lookin' subject though. Caught him right by the ankle, and threw him straight into our spring. Lucky we'd had all the drink we wanted before he started to wash there!"

"Why, blessed if it ain't my kodak!" ejaculated Step Hen faintly, as though it shocked him to think

how his lost camera should have been lying there in all that tangle of grass, where it had undoubtedly fallen as he prepared to take his turn bending over the water hole.

Of course everybody laughed, for they could guess what had happened. Step Hen's little failings were an everyday occurrence. As Giraffe had often declared, the careless one would have long since lost his head had not a kind Nature secured it to his body.

The march was resumed, with Thad lecturing Step Hen on his prevailing sin; and as usual Step Hen solemnly promising to be more careful the next time. But he had a very slippery mind, and the chances were that before nightfall he would be up to his old tricks again, accusing the rest of playing a prank by hiding some of his possessions.

"There's a man sitting on that rock up there, watching us!" said Davy Jones, in a tone that thrilled them all.

"A regular mountaineer too," added Smithy. "Just as I've pictured them often, with butternut jean trousers, a ragged woolen shirt open at the neck, and an old hat on his frowsy head. Boys, he seems to have a gun in his possession, too."

They were a little uneasy as they passed along; but the lone man seemed to simply watch the squad of uniformed scouts without making any hostile move.

"Chances are," remarked Davy Jones, after they lost sight of the man; "he was some sort of vidette or sentry, posted up there to keep an eye on the trail; and if any suspicious characters came along, to send word to the other moonshiners. I understand they can telegraph all right without the aid of instruments, or even the latest wireless outfit. How about that, Bob?"

"Yes, it is so," replied the Southern boy. "They do it by making smokes; or sometimes by sounds that are passed along from one station to another. It's queer how fast a message can be relayed in that way."

"Well," remarked Thad, "that's the method used by blacks in Africa; and they do say they can send news of a battle faster than white men can get it along by relays of telegraph stations, with breaks where a carrier has to be used."

"Are we getting anywhere close to the place you said old Reuben lived at, Bob?" asked Bumpus, who was showing signs of being tired.

"Another hour will take us to where we can look across the wonderful little valley and see the place," Bob answered. "You will all be surprised, for nobody would ever think so fine a house could be found among these wild mountains; but as I told you before, Reuben Sparks seems never to have been molested by the moonshiners. Most people believe he is a secret partner in the business."

"Say, would you look yonder, where that road comes around the spur back of us; to think of seeing a real buggy and a flesh and blood horse, and back of the animal a gentleman and lady! I'm sure dreaming!" remarked Giraffe, just then.

"Not a bit of it you ain't, because I see them myself," added Step Hen, eagerly.

"And unless my eyes deceive me, we've met that gentleman before," said Allan.

"Yes," remarked Bob, with trembling voice, "it's Reuben Sparks; and that must be my little cousin, Bertha!"

CHAPTER IX.

OPENING COMMUNICATIONS.

It was the most natural thing in the world for the detachment of scouts to come to a halt when they discovered the vehicle coming up in their rear. In the midst of such wild surroundings it was indeed quite a surprise to discover anything so civilized. So they lined up on either side of the road, resting on the stout staves which all of them carried as a means of assistance in their mountain climbing; just as tourists in the Alps do when ascending some peak.

Thad noticed how quickly Bob White pulled his broad-brimmed campaign hat down over his eyes; and at the same time managed to slip partly behind one of his companions. It would interfere somewhat with the cherished plans of the boy, should Reuben Sparks recognize him; and this was a catastrophe which Bob certainly wished to avoid, if possible.

The vehicle came on, and apparently the man must be telling his companion how he had met these young fellows before, for she was looking ahead

with a great deal of interest and curiosity; though hardly dreaming that her cousin could be among the lads, who were clad in neat khaki uniforms, with puttees for leggings, and the well-known hats that distinguish Boy Scouts in every clime under the sun.

Just as Thad had expected would be the case, Reuben Sparks drew in his horse as he arrived in the midst of the scouts. Evidently he wanted to have a few minutes' talk with them; and allow the girl a chance to catch for herself a fleeting glimpse of that outside world of which she knew so little.

"How are you, boys?" remarked the driver of the horse.

"Pretty fairly, sir," replied Thad, anxious to keep the attention of the other directed toward himself as much as possible, because of Bob's desire to remain unnoticed in the background. We haven't been used to mountain work; but it's fine exercise, and our muscles are getting in shape by degrees."

Thad had before now, of course, flung a look at the girl who was sitting beside Reuben Sparks. He was more interested because of the fact that he knew her to be the little Cousin Bertha, of whom Bob White had been telling him.

She was a pretty little girl too, Thad could see that; and he also thought there was a wistful expression on her delicate face. If, as Bob declared, Bertha was really a prisoner in the care of a cruel guardian, when her whole soul longed to be away

from these wild mountains, and in the haunts of civilization, that expression would be easily understood.

And right then and there Thad Brewster found himself siding with his chum Bob White more than ever. He felt a hope beginning to grow strong within his heart that some way might be discovered whereby Bertha could be taken from the Blue Ridge, which country she detested, and transplanted to that Northern town where lived her own flesh and blood relatives, who yearned to care for her tenderly, if only the law would allow.

Thad saw that Bob was no longer in the same place. The scouts had moved forward a little, to cluster around the vehicle, while their leader held conversation with the gentleman. And Bob was gradually making his way around so as to come on the other side, where he might in some way attract the attention of the little maid without Reuben seeing him.

It was plain to be seen that he hoped to seize upon this golden opportunity to open communications with Bertha. Thad, while he continued to talk with Reuben, and interest him more or less in the object of a hike on the part of Boy Scouts, kept one eye in the direction of Bob White.

He saw the other take off his campaign hat, and wave it up and down with a movement that of course attracted the attention of the girl. She

started violently as she saw that well-known face of her cousin, of whom she had been so fond ever since she was a little tot.

Wise Bob instantly placed a warning finger on his lips, and the girl immediately turned her face the other way, while that campaign hat was drawn further down than ever over the boy's face. So that when Reuben glanced round, as if wondering what had caused his ward to give such a violent start, he saw nothing suspicious in the boy who was apparently bending over, fastening his shoestring.

Of course Reuben Sparks knew more or less about Boy Scouts, even though he may never have had the opportunity of meeting any of the great organization up to this time. No one who had the ability to read the papers could be without that knowledge. And Thad made it a point to mention any number of interesting features connected with their work, that rather opened his eyes, and kept him asking for more information.

Like many other people, Reuben Sparks had imagined that the movement had to do with drilling American boys, so that they could become soldiers as they grew up. He now learned, to his surprise, that there never could be a greater mistake. Instead of teaching boys to fight, the principles of the organization tend toward peace. The main thing advanced is to make boys more manly, self-reliant, courteous, brave, self-sacrificing, forgetting their

own comfort when they can do a good deed, and relieve distress; take care of themselves when in the woods; and perhaps save the life of a comrade, should he be wounded by a carelessly used hatchet; or come near drowning.

No wonder then that Reuben Sparks found himself intensely interested in what Thad was telling him. His eyes were being opened to facts that he had never dreamed could be connected with a simple organization of growing lads. And many another who has scoffed at the silly idea of trying to improve upon the breed of American boys, has been staggered when brought face to face with many wonderful results that have already sprung from this greatest of all upward movements.

Thad saw after a bit that his object had been accomplished. Bob White had not been so busy tying his shoestring as Reuben imagined. On the contrary he was scribbling something on a scrap of paper, which he held doubled up in his hand when he worked his way to the rear of the vehicle.

Undoubtedly the little missy who sat there so demurely beside Reuben must have been slily watching his actions. And moreover, she surely divined what Bob meant to do; for as Thad watched, he saw her left hand, being the one further away from her guardian, quietly slip back, until it came within easy touching distance of the scout who had sauntered up there.

No doubt impulsive Bob must have pressed that little hand even as he passed his note into its possession; for as he told Thad, he had always loved his small cousin like a sister.

Fearing detection, the boy quickly moved away; and it was fortunate he did, since Reuben in the midst of his questions glanced suspiciously around, a minute later.

There was now no longer any reason for detaining the owner of the vehicle; and Thad's eagerness in answering questions and giving information slackened.

Truth to tell, he was not at all favorably impressed with the looks of the gentleman. Reuben had keen, rat-like eyes, that seemed to burn a hole in one when they became focused. There was constant suspicion in his manner, as though with so many secrets to hide, he had always to be on guard. And besides, Thad believed that Bob must have struck a true chord when he declared the other to be cruel and unscrupulous by nature.

Perhaps he might be plotting to secure the little inheritance left to the child by her father. It seemed almost beyond belief that any one could be so mean as to want to injure so sweet looking a little girl as Bertha; but then, Old Reuben worshipped gold, and when a man becomes a miser he hesitates at few things in order to add to his stores.

But however the gentleman might have been in-

terested in learning more about the ways of Boy Scouts, Thad took particular notice that he did not invite the hiking Silver Fox Patrol to stop a day or so with him at his mountain home.

It might have been just natural meanness that caused this, since eight healthy young appetites would eat up all in his larder. But then again, there may have been other reasons for the lack of Southern hospitality. Possibly Reuben did not care to have inquisitive strangers prowling about his place. He may have occasional visitors, who brought cargoes which he would not want other eyes to see.

The boys fell in shortly after the vehicle had vanished around a bend of the road ahead; and the march was once more resumed.

Of course Bob took the earliest opportunity to forge alongside of Thad. He was feverishly excited, so that his black eyes sparkled, and his breath came faster than usual.

"What did you think of him, Thad?" he asked, the first thing.

"I must say I don't just like his looks;" replied the other; "but your little cousin is everything you said she was. But Bob, she doesn't look happy!"

"You could see that too, could you, suh?" exclaimed the other, gritting his teeth angrily. "I know he treats her badly. She is thinner in the cheeks than she was two years ago, though taller some. And Thad, there's a look in her eyes that

hurts me. I'm glad I wrote what I did in that little note I slipped in her hand. Later on I'm going to tell you about it. But oh! it looks like there was a slim chance to do anything for poor little Bertha."

Thad hardly knew how to console his chum. Boy-like he was ready to promise anything that lay in his power.

"Well, there are eight of us, and that's not as bad as being here alone," he suggested, with a cheering pat of his hand on the other's shoulder.

"You'll never know how much comfort I get out of that, Thad," the Southern boy went on to say, in a broken voice. "You see, I've been believing for a long time that there must have been something crooked about the way Reuben Sparks came into possession of Bertha, and her property. But how to prove it, when my father failed, is what gets me now. But I'm full of hope; and what you keep saying gives me a heap of solid comfort. I'm going to try and learn the truth while I'm down here; and take her away from that man, if it can be done. I'm only a boy, and he's a cold scheming man; but all the same, Thad, something inside here seems to tell me my visit to the Old Blue Ridge isn't going to be useless."

Bob White seemed to be sensibly encouraged after his little chat with the patrol leader; for when he dropped back among the rest of the scouts he had allowed a winning smile to creep over his dark, proud, handsome face.

CHAPTER X.

THE VOICE OF THE SILVER FOX PATROL.

"We're going to pitch our camp right here, boys!" said the scout leader, some time later; "and remember, there's to be no shouting from this time on. We're in the enemy's country, and must observe the rules of caution."

"Oh! ain't I glad though," sighed Bumpus, who had been busily engaged between wiping his perspiring brow, and avoiding stumbles over obstacles that seemed to take particular delight in getting in his way, he thought.

"But I hope you're not going so far, Thad, as to keep us from having our regular camp-fire?" remarked Giraffe. "Without that, it'd be a sad business, I'm thinking. And what's supper, without a cup of coffee?"

Thad had been talking again with Bob White; and evidently the boy who was acquainted with the locality must have posted the patrol leader regarding things.

"Oh! we don't expect to do without that, make

your mind easy, Number Six," he replied, with a laugh, knowing what a weakness Giraffe had in the line of eating; though it seemed to do him little good, since he was as " thin as a rail," plump little Bumpus used to declare.

With various exclamations of satisfaction the weary boys tossed their burdens aside, and followed by throwing themselves on the ground. After a short rest, of course preparations for passing the night would be in order; but a little breathing spell, first of all, was in order.

Thad walked away, in company with Allan and Bob White.

" Now, what in the wide world d'ye think they're going to do? " demanded Step Hen, when the three had vanished from sight among the brush that lay around.

" There you go," broke out Bumpus, " as curious as any old maid in all Cranford, always wantin' to know the reason why. A pretty scout you'll make, Step Hen; and it'll be a long time before you win any medals, or pass an exam. for the proud position of a first-class scout. But I wonder what they *do* mean to do? "

The others laughed at this.

" After this, Bumpus, take the moat out of your own eye before you try and get a fence rail from mine. But they're up to some dodge, take it from me. And it'll be mean if they don't let us into the

deal, sooner or later," and Step Hen shook his head dismally as he spoke; for he was most unhappy when he believed there was anything going on without his being told all about it.

"Great country this," remarked Smithy, lying there on his back, and looking up at the lofty peaks that were bathed in the glow of the setting sun. "About as wild as anything I ever saw. Don't surprise me to know that the men who were born and brought up here can defy the clumsy officers of the Government, when they attempt to capture them. In my humble opinion they'll just keep on making that moonshine stuff here in the Big Smokies until the year three thousand, if the Washington people hold that big tax on the real brand, so as to make it worth while."

"It sure is some ragged," remarked Davy Jones, yawning; for Davy did not happen to be possessed of a soul that could admire the grandeur of any rough scenery; and only thought what a nuisance it was to have to do so much climbing all the while.

"Hold on there, Step Hen," exclaimed Giraffe, as the other started to collect a handful of small sticks; "don't you dare think of starting that fire. That's my particular job; the patrol leader gave it over to me, you understand."

"Just to keep you good," sneered Step Hen, throwing the sticks down again. "You keep on itching to make fires so much, that he just had to

bribe you to let up, or some day you'd set the river afire."

"Huh! no danger of you ever doing that, I guess," chuckled Giraffe.

All the same, he got up, and began to gather small tinder on his own account.

"Mind you," he observed a minute later, as though half regretting his action in squelching Step Hen so soon; "if anybody feels like lending a hand to gather fuel, why there ain't nothin' against *that;* and we'll have that bully old coffee all the sooner, you understand."

This sort of subtle persuasion seemed to at least stir Davy Jones into life, for getting slowly to his feet, he began to collect larger wood, and throw it down close to where the energetic fire-builder was starting to make his blaze.

Giraffe was a real fire worshipper. He dreamed of his pet hobby; and many times could be seen, apparently idly whittling a stick; when, if asked what he was doing, his reply would invariably be:

"Well, we might want to start a fire some time or other; and then these shavings'd come in handy, you see."

On several notable occasions this weakness of Giraffe's had managed to get him into more or less trouble; and the sagacious scout leader finally had to take him to task. So on this mountain hike it had been agreed between them that Giraffe would

refrain from attempting his favorite rôle of making miscellaneous fires at odd times, if allowed to build all the camp-fires of the trip.

And so far he had really kept his word, though there were times when the temptation nearly overcame his scruples.

When Thad and the other two came back, darkness had settled over the scene. This came all the sooner on account of the high walls that shut them in on either side; though just beyond the boys believed there must be some sort of an open spot, in the way of a valley.

"I'm glad to see that you made a fine fireplace for cooking, Number Six," remarked the patrol leader, as he looked around; "because we may spend a day or so right here, resting up a bit. Now, while supper is getting underway I'm going to tell you a few things that are at to interest you some. They concern our comrade Bob White here, and he's given me full permission to say what I'm going to."

"There, Step Hen, what did I tell you?" cried Bumpus, gleefully. "Next time just get a throttle grip on that bump of curiosity of yours."

"I've heard my maw say people that live in glass houses hadn't ought to heave any stones," retorted the other, witheringly.

But the boys quickly forgot all their differences, once Thad started to tell of the strange things which he had heard from Bob White.

There was an intaking of the breath, such as would indicate great excitement, as they learned how Bob's father had been connected with the raids on the secret Stills of the mountain moonshiners. And when finally they heard how he had met so terrible a fate, while pursuing his sworn duty by the Government, glances of true brotherly sympathy were cast in the direction of Bob.

"Now," said Thad, in conclusion; "you've heard about all there is to tell; and I know you're tremendously astonished, because none of us had any idea that we were going to run up against such a thing as this when we asked Bob to let us go with him to his old home here among the Blue Ridge Mountains. But what is important to know, is your decision. Majority rules in everything of this kind; and if more than half of you think we ought to turn right back, and not keep on, why, there's nothing to be done but turn about, and go over the trail again."

"Well, not much!" exclaimed Giraffe, filled with a spirit of boyish comradeship toward the chum who had been so sorely afflicted, and whose sad story was now discovered for the first time.

"Put it up to a vote, Thad!" remarked Bumpus, trying to look grim and determined, though his round face was usually so merry that it was a hard proposition for him to seem serious.

"All in favor of returning to-morrow say aye," Thad suggested.

Just as he expected, there was absolute silence.

"All in favor of sticking to our chum through thick and thin, and doing all we can to help him over the rough places, say aye!" the leader continued.

A chorus of eager assents drowned his words. Bob White's fine dark eyes filled up with tears. He could not trust himself to speak; but the look he gave each and every one of those seven loyal comrades was more eloquent than any words could have been.

"After we've had supper," Thad went on, warmly, "Bob means to go to keep his appointment with his little cousin, who expects to slip out of the house, and meet him where he wrote her he would be at a certain hour. There's the queerest valley you ever saw just ahead of us. Across it you can see the lights of Reuben Sparks' house, and several others that lie there in a bunch, a sort of hamlet, because it's hardly a village. And Bob says that Reuben really owns about the whole place. He can get over there in an hour or so, because he knows the ground so well. And while he's gone, we can take it easy here, making up our beds for the night; if so be there are any bushes to be cut, worth sleeping on."

"Hey, would you see how fine a fire-tender that Giraffe is; it's gone clean out, that's what?" cried Step Hen, just then.

"Well, would you blame him, when he was listening to such an interesting story as the one I had to tell?" asked Thad. "Get busy, Number Six, and have a blaze going in quick time."

"Ay, ay, sir," sang out Giraffe, who had wisely laid aside a surplus supply of fine stuff when making the fire, which now came in very handy.

And when the coffee was finally done, and they gathered around, sitting on rocks, logs, or even cross-legged, tailor-fashion, on the ground, the eight scouts made a very fine picture in their uniforms.

Apparently their appetites had been sharpened by that afternoon jaunt, judging from the way they pitched in. And perhaps, after all, Reuben Sparks had been a wise as well as prudent man when he failed to invite this squad of lads to stop over with him; for they would have made a sad inroad on the contents of his larder; and food costs money.

"Where's Bob?" demanded Bumpus, suddenly, after they had been about half an hour trying to lighten their supplies, and with wonderfully good success. He was sitting over yonder only three minutes ago; and now he's gone. Reckon that bad spirit of yours is sneakin' around again, Step Hen, and must a took Bob by mistake; though I pity his eyes if he'd ever think so good lookin' a feller as Bob could be you!"

"Bob's gone to keep his appointment," remarked Thad, quietly.

And the boys said nothing more about it, knowing that the Southern lad laid considerable store upon this meeting with his little cousin Bertha; whom he expected to coax in to helping him try and see whether sly old Reuben Sparks might not have forgotten to destroy all evidence of fraud, in connection with his dealings with her father, the uncle of Bob.

So the conversation drifted to other topics; and soon they were laughing over some of the queer happennings in the past history of the Silver Fox Patrol.

CHAPTER XI.

WHAT WAS UNDER THE HAT.

THE flames crackled merrily, and the seven boys who lounged there in as comfortable attitudes as they could strike, were fully enjoying themselves. This sort of outdoor life seemed to appeal very strongly to all of them, though of course to some more than others.

It had always been a passion with Thad, for instance; and Allan could look back to scores of occasions when he sat by a camp-fire; because he was a Maine boy, and as such had spent consider-

able time in the piney woods of his native State, hunting, fishing, and living close to Nature's heart.

While they could not indulge in any of their songs, according to the regulations that had been put in force by the patrol leader, this did not prevent the boys from enjoying sundry good laughs when comical stories were told.

"Reckon Bob's been gone more'n an hour now," remarked Step Hen, who had been more thrilled by the story of the Government agent's sad fate than any of the others; because Step Hen had always been a great reader of tales of daring and adventure, and often pictured himself playing the rôle of a hero, with the admiring crowd cheering him to the echo, and wanting to carry him around on their shoulders.

"Yes, and pretty soon Allan will be going out to communicate with him, because, you know they arranged a series of signals by means of the lantern, and burning matches that Bob'll hold up. But don't talk too loud about that same matter, Step Hen; because, you understand, we're close by the road; and somebody might be coming along at the time. Remember that man we saw sitting on the rock with his gun between his knees? Well, I guess there are a considerable number of others just like him around these diggings; and by now they all know we're in the mountains, bent on some errand they can't understand."

Of course it was Thad himself who said all this. He knew the failing Step Hen had of shouting everything out loud; and Thad really believed they would be wise to carry on their conversation in tones that could not be heard very far away.

It turned out later that he was wiser than he dreamed, when he gave Step Hen this little hint.

They had started Bumpus telling how an angry bull had once chased him around a tree on his uncle's farm, and the boys were laughing at his comical description of the scene at the time when the pursuit was hottest, and he could have caught hold of the animal's tail had he wanted, when a dismal wail arose.

"Well, did you ever, if that ain't Step Hen putting up his regular howl!" exclaimed Giraffe, indignantly.

"And just when Bumpus here had got to the most exciting point in his yarn," added the disgusted Davy Jones.

"Whatever are you looking for now, you poor silly thing?" demanded the story-teller, who himself disliked very much to have his thrilling tale interrupted in this manner.

"I can't find my hat, and that's what?" declared the scout whose besetting sin was carelessness; "Had it on only a little while ago, but now it's sure gone up the flue."

Step Hen twisted his neck as he spoke, and looked

up into the branches of the tree under which they had built their camp-fire; just as though he really suspected that a giant hand had been lowered from the foliage, to clutch his campaign hat from his head, and vanish with it.

Things that Step Hen owned were always in great demand among these mysterious spirits of the air; since nothing belonging to his chums seemed ever to disappear.

"Oh! sit down, and let Bumpus finish his story," growled Giraffe. "What's an old hat after all, to kick up such a row over it? Ten to one now you've stowed it away in one of your pockets. I've known you to do that more'n a few times."

"'Tain't so, because I've tried every pocket I've got, and never found a thing. P'raps, now, one of you fellers happened to see it lying around, and put it on, of course by mistake, thinkin' it his own. Anybody got two hats on?"

"You make me tired, sure you do, Step Hen," Giraffe continued. "We know what he is, boys, and that none of us will get any peace till his old hat turns up. Might as well get out, and find it for the poor baby. If I lost things as much as Step Hen does, I'd just get some twine, and tie everything on, good and tight. Then if I missed my hat all I'd have to do would be to pull in a certain string, and there she'd be, all slick and sound."

While he was speaking Giraffe arose to his feet, but not without making sundry wry faces; for he had been sitting a whole hour in a cramped position, and his muscles were moreover tired from the day's jaunt.

"Now watch me find your old hat before you can say Jack Robinson fifty times," he boasted, as he started to hustle about.

Step Hen seemed quite willing that he should carry out his word, for he himself made no further move looking to hunting for the missing head-gear.

Suddenly they heard Giraffe give a queer little grunt, that seemed to contain a mixture of satisfaction and disdain. He darted into the adjoining bushes.

"Here she is!" he called out, and alyin' in the shadows, as cute as you please. Use your eyes next time, Step Hen, and p'raps—oh! great governor!"

Giraffe came jumping back into the circle of light cast by the camp-fire. He certainly did have a hat clutched in his hand, at which he was staring in the oddest way imaginable.

The others had gained their feet, drawn by some motive that possibly they themselves did not half understand; but it had seemed to Thad as though there was a note of sudden alarm in Giraffe's cry; and the others may have thought the same thing.

Step Hen, believing himself to be entitled to the recovery of his individual property, hustled for-

ward, and deliberately took the hat from the hand of his comrade.

"Much obliged, Giraffe, on account of going to all that trouble for me," he said, sweetly, so as to impress the other, and cause him to repeat the favor at some future time. "But it's mighty queer how my hat ever got over in that clump of bushes. Give you my word for it, I ain't stepped that way since we struck here; afraid of snakes, you know, fellers. Goes to prove what I told you about *something* hoverin' around, that we just can't see, and which grabs things belongin' to me every—say, Giraffe, what sort of a joke are you playin' on me now; this ain't my hat!"

"I—know—it—ain't!" gasped the tall scout, who seemed to have some difficulty in regaining his breath.

"It's an old and worn-out thing in the bargain; and see here, it ain't even regulation campaign, because it's off color. There ain't no cord around it either; and my hat's got my badge fastened to it, to tell it from the rest when they get mixed. Where'd you get this old thing, anyhow, Giraffe?"

By now the other had recovered from the shock which he seemed to have received. He was even eager to tell his version of the affair, as his comrades clustered around him.

"I saw the hat when I told you I did," he began, in an awed voice; "and all the time I was aspeakin'

I kept pushin' my way into the brush, intendin' to snatch up the same, and throw it out to Step Hen here. The reason I cut short was because, when I grabbed the hat by the rim, and gave a jerk, *I felt a head under it!"*

Bumpus immediately caught hold of the arm of the scoutmaster. It was not because he was afraid, though Bumpus had often been reckoned a bit timid; but the action appeared to inspire him with confidence. He knew that Thad would be equal to the emergency. And in times of stress it feels good to be in close touch with one who is going to save the day.

Thad understood without being told, what it all meant. Some spy had been secretly observing the movements of the scouts, hidden in that bunch of brushwood; and when his hat caught the eager eye of Giraffe, the latter had supposed of course that it was the missing head-gear.

They looked blankly at each other, Thad, Allan and the other five. Then, as if unconsciously, and by mutual consent, they turned their gaze in the direction of the thicket from which Step Hen had just emerged, bearing the tell-tale stranger hat in his hand.

Perhaps they expected to see some one rushing away in hot haste, so as not to be caught napping by these young fellows wearing the uniform in use by United States regulars.

But nothing seemed to be moving there; at least they caught no sound to indicate that the spy was in full flight at that moment.

Thad reached out, and took the hat from the trembling hand of Step Hen; who heaved a sigh of relief upon feeling it leave his clutch; as though a spell might have been broken by the act.

One look told the patrol leader that in all probability the hat belonged to a mountaineer. It was indeed old, and had an unusually wide brim. Being somewhat of the same color as those worn by the scouts, in the semi-darkness it was no wonder Giraffe had made the mistake he did, and reached out for it, under the belief that he had found the missing head-gear of the careless comrade.

Of course he realized his astonishing mistake the instant his fingers came in contact with a human head that had been held low down, in the expectation that the spying owner might remain undiscovered.

Thad knew that they were apt to see more of the one to whom that article belonged. Sometimes these mountaineers think a good deal of the hats they wear; at least Thad knew they clung to them a pretty long time, if the greasy appearance of some he had seen might be taken for an index to the affection they entertained for the felt that sheltered their heads from the summer sun, and the wintry blasts.

"Well, Giraffe, you certainly made a big mistake

when you took this hat for the one our chum had lost," remarked Thad, in a loud, clear voice, which he hoped would reach the ears of the one in hiding, and bring him forth; "and you owe some sort of an apology to the owner."

"But how in the wide world c'n I tell whose hat it is, Thad?" expostulated the tall and lanky scout.

"Thet's all right, younker," said a gruff voice, "I'm the critter as owns thet ere hat; Phin Dady's my name. Reckon ye've heard o' me," and with the words a man stalked into the camp.

He was tall and straight, and carried a long repeating rifle. More than that, he had a small face, and piercing eyes like those of a badger. And every scout felt a thrill as he realized that he was face to face with the notorious moonshiner, Phin Dady, whom the whole United States Government had tried for years in vain to capture.

CHAPTER XII.

AN HONORED GUEST.

THE boys looked at the moonshiner, who returned their stares with interest. He seemed utterly indifferent as to whether they chose to receive him either as a friend or a foe. From this Thad was almost certain that there must be other fierce

mountaineers close by, ready to back up their chief, should he provoke a quarrel with the strange boys in uniform.

That fact meant serious trouble for the scouts, if it happened to come to pass. Thad knew that these lawless men of the mountains, who snap their fingers at the authority of the courts, and feel safe in the security of their secret fastnesses, deep in the unknown regions back of the trodden trails, think very little of human life. They are usually engaged in some vendetta between rival factions, or families, and blood is frequently shed.

Understanding how thin was the ice upon which he and his comrades were skating, the patrol leader felt that he could not be too careful how he provoked this man of strong passions to violence.

A little to his surprise Phin Dady wheeled, and faced him directly. But then the mountaineer was gifted with a sharp vision, and he could readily guess which one of the scouts served in the capacity of leader. Perhaps there was that in the manner of Thad to tell him this fact. Or he might have been watching and listening long enough to see how the others all deferred to Thad's judgment.

"I gut yer letter O. K." he said, simply.

Thad's anxious face brightened up instantly; he saw that for the time being the other meant to put aside his hostility. Curiosity had supplanted enmity. He wanted to learn more about what that

term "Boy Scouts," used in the message left in the cleft of the stick, might mean.

"And I hope you read what we wrote, Phin Dady?" the boy asked, eagerly.

A whimsical smile flashed athwart the thin face of the mountaineer.

"As fur me, I ain't much o' a hand ter read, any more'n I am ter write; but thar chanced ter be a feller along as hed sum schoolin'; an' him an' me, we managed ter figger it out. Thort as how I'd like ter run up agin ye all, an' larn wat all this hyar bizness consarnin' Boy Scouts be. Heerd tell 'bout sich, but never cud find anythin' but a cold trail. So I kim over ter see ye; an' p'raps now ye'd open up an' 'xplain."

"I'll be only too glad to do that, if you'll take a seat at our camp-fire here for a little while, Phin Dady," Thad remarked, making a movement with his hand to indicate where the other could find a comfortable spot to rest.

The man looked closely at the speaker; then turned his head, and deliberately made a motion with his hand, that must have been intended for some concealed confederate. After which he stepped over, and took a seat, but not the one Thad had indicated as the post of honor.

"Reckon I'll sit hyar, ef so be it's all ther same ter you-uns," he said, as he dropped down, and swung his rifle across his knees. "Yuh see, I likes

ter look at everybody w'en I gets ter talkin'. It's more sociable like."

But Thad knew better. The gleam in those beady eyes told him what the true meaning of this action must be. When a man has been hunted, in and out of season, for the better part of his long life, he naturally become most suspicious of every stranger, young and old. Many had been the shrewd games engineered by the revenue men to catch this old weasel asleep. He trusted no one all the way, even his best friends, who might be tempted to betray him because of the reward that was offered for his capture.

But although Thad had guessed just why the other chose the seat he had taken, it would have been most unwise on his part to have shown any resentment; or even to let Phin Dady know that he understood.

"You see, Thad began, simply," we were warned to be careful before we left Asheville, because people said that the fact of our wearing uniforms might make the mountain folks think we had something to do with the army. I was explaining all about what the Boy Scouts represent to Mr. Reuben Sparks only a short time ago, and he was greatly interested. If you'll listen, then, I'll go back, and tell what we aim to do; and why we have left our homes to take a long hike through a mountainous region, for up where we live we have no such big hills as these."

So Thad began, and told in as simple language as he could find just what objects were kept in mind among all troops of Boy Scouts, whether in America, England, Australia, South Africa, Germany, France or any other country on the face of the globe.

Fortunately Thad was a good talker. He knew how to make use of a whole lot of little things in order to arouse the interest of the one who was listening; and he certainly had a subject worthy of his best efforts in this explanation of what the Boy Scout movement stood for.

And the mountain man was deeply interested too. He proved this by the way he hung upon the words of the boy. Now and then his suspicious nature would show itself in a cautious look around, as though he wanted to make sure that no shrewd game were being engineered, while the speaker kept his attention engaged.

Several times he broke in on Thad to ask questions. He could not get it through his head, for instance, why boys any more than men, should set about doing all the work that scouts attempt, without pay. In this region of the hookworm, where men never dream of working until driven to it by actual hunger, they think others must be crazy to voluntarily take upon themselves huge tasks that try both brain and muscle.

"But sure the Gov'ment pays yuh!" he said three

separate times, as though he felt positive there must be some secret connection between the Boy Scout movement, and the authorities at Washington; else why should they be wearing the uniform he and his fellow-moonshiners had come to look on as the mark of the oppressor; for several times the army had been called into the field to hunt down the elusive law breakers, who simply vanished utterly from view, and remained in hiding until the raid was over.

"Not one cent do we get from anybody," Thad assured him, positively. "Why, even our uniforms have to be bought with money we've each one earned. We're not allowed to accept them as a gift from any man, or any source. So you see, we're under no obligations to anybody."

Again Phin Dady asked a series of questions which would indicate that he was at least interested in all Thad told him, though possibly he believed only a small part of the whole.

When Thad repeated to him the twelve cardinal features of a Boy Scout's vow, taken when he joined a troop, Phin shook his head helplessly, as though it were beyond his power of understanding. Indeed, that was where the trouble lay; he possessed so shallow a nature that he was utterly unable to grasp the full significance of the scheme. There must be some sort of recompense, in dollars and cents, to make it worth while for any person to do

things that called for labor. And that was why he continued to keep his weapon across his knees as he sat and listened, and asked an occasional question. Phin Dady was not going to be lulled to sleep by any interesting yarn that sounded very "fishy" in his ears.

Of course, the other scouts had discreetly remained silent while all this was going on. They were content to let Thad do the talking, for none of them could equal the patrol leader in explaining what the benefits were, which boys might expect to obtain when they joined a scout patrol.

Several of them just sat there, and stared in open-mouthed wonder at the man, of whom they had heard more or less lately, and whose defiance of the authorities had been a matter of many years' standing.

Phin Dady might boast of no education whatever; and his knowledge of the world, outside the confines of the Big Smokies, was doubtless extremely limited; but he did possess what served him far better in the warfare in which he was continually engaged with revenue agents—a natural shrewdness such as the wily fox of the forest shows, and by means of which he outwits his pursuers.

"An' yuh kim 'way down this away jest tuh climb the mountings, an' see wot yuh cud do acampin' out without ary tents er blankets, did yuh?" the mountaineer went on, surveying the boyish faces

that formed a half circle around him. "Wall, I jest reckons ye'll know a heap more by ther time ye gits back ter yer homes'n yuh did w'en yuh started out."

He chuckled as he said that. Thad wondered whether there could be any hidden meaning back of the words. When dealing with such a slippery customer as this hunted moonshiner, it was always necessary to keep on the watch. The man who always suspected others of double dealing might be in the same class himself.

"Oh! we're quite sure of that," said the patrol leader, with a pleasant smile. "Already those among us who had never climbed a mountain slope before, have had their leg muscles stiffened, and can do better work than in the start. We expect to have a pretty good time all around. And we wrote you that message, Phin Dady, because we believed you were ordering us out of these mountains under a mistake that we meant to do you, or some of your friends, harm. We want you to feel that we never dreamed of that when we started in here."

"Then I hopes as how yuh beant changin' o' yer minds sence yuh kim," remarked the moonshiner, just as though he knew what the subject of their recent conversations might have been.

Before Thad could decide just what sort of an answer he ought to make, if any at all, the manner of the other changed as if by magic. His face took on a fierce expression, and he looked along the row

of boyish faces by which he was confronted, as though one of them had done something to arouse his hot anger.

The click of the hammer of his gun could be heard as his thumb drew it back; and the scouts shrank away in dismay when they saw the flame in his small eyes.

"Quick! tell me you'uns, whar be the other one? Thar was sure eight w'en we counted yuh from the side o' the mounting. An' it mout pay yuh ter 'member thet Ole Phin, he beant the man ter fool with. Eight thar was; whar be the other right now?"

And Thad realized that the ice was indeed getting desperately thin under their feet at that particular moment.

CHAPTER XIII.

BAITING OLD PHIN, THE MOONSHINER.

THAD himself managed to retain his self-possession under these trying conditions. What he believed he had to fear most of all, was that one of his chums might give the secret away by some ill-advised remark, uttered under the spur of the moment. He knew that they must have shrunk back,

appalled, when the moonshiner made such a threatening move, accompanying his fierce words. But for the life of him Thad could not tear his eyes away from the face of the man himself.

It was just as well. Phin Dady looked to Thad, as the leader of the scouts, for an answer to his demand. Had the boy shown any evidences of confusion or weakening just then, it might have confirmed the sudden ugly suspicions that had flashed into the other's mind, and just when he was growing more or less interested in the wonderful stories he had been listening to concerning the aims and ambitions of these uniformed lads.

"There are eight of us, just as you say," Thad remarked, trying to look surprised at the change of front on the part of his caller; "but the other one, White his name is, has gone to see Reuben Sparks on business. We expect him back inside of an hour or so. If you'd care to wait you can meet him."

His air was so candid, and his face so free from guile that the moonshiner could find no further cause for suspicion. Besides, had he not heard in the beginning that the scouts had already made the acquaintance of Reuben Sparks; who, like himself had displayed more or less interest in their aims and ambitions.

Phin Dady even began to feel a little ashamed of his sudden threatening attitude. The fierce look on his thin face, that with his gleaming wolfish eyes,

had made him appear so savage, gradually vanished. It gave way to a rather stupid grin; as though the man realized how silly it was of him to suspect that these half-grown boys could do injury to one who for years had defied all the forces of the United States Government.

"So, thet's it, younker, is it?" he said; "wall, I'm right glad ye c'd 'xplain ther thing right off'n the reel. Course Mister Sparks, he's int'rested in byes, even ef he beant the father o' any hisself. An' he 'vited yer pal over ter see him, did he, so's ter tell him a heap more?"

"He was very much taken with the idea, and showed it by asking a great many questions," Thad went on; trying to keep within the lines of the truth, and yet allow the other to draw his own conclusions, to the effect that Reuben had given one of the patrol a pressing invitation to call upon him, and continue the interesting recital of the Boy Scouts' ambitions.

"Yuh war sayin' right now, thet these hyar byes hain't never 'xpectin' ter be sojers; an' thet they don't kerry arms; air thet a fack?"

When the mountaineer made this remark he was looking straight toward the tree, against which rested the shotgun. Evidently he was a little in doubt concerning the truth of what the patrol leader had said; or it may have been, wise Old Phin was desirous of learning just what he and his followers

would have to go up against if ever they attacked the camp of the invaders.

Thad laughed good naturedly.

"That's the only firearm in camp, just at present," he declared. "It belongs to me, you see. We knew there would be little or no hunting on this trip, as the season for protection in North Carolina is on. But not wanting to be without some sort of arms, it was decided to carry just one shotgun. Later on we expect to spend some time up in Maine; and then it'll be all right for us to carry rifles for big game shooting. One of our members comes from Maine, and knows all about it up in that region."

Thad talked at length, because he saw that somehow the sound of his voice seemed to have a soothing effect on the rough mountaineer. Evidently Phin Dady had taken more or less of a fancy to the leader of the scouts. He had known many boys in his day, and perhaps had one or two of his own; but they were like bear cubs in comparison with this frank-faced youth, with the winning smile, and a whole dictionary of words at the tip of his tongue.

By now the balance of the boys had managed to recover from their fright. They even began to show an interest in the conversation, though not venturing to say a word unless Thad appealed directly to one of them; as he did occasionally, to corroborate something he had declared.

It was a scene they would none of them be apt to forget in a long time—this untamed old mountaineer sitting there by their camp-fire, asking questions in connection with a subject that had aroused his keenest curiosity; while they lounged around, listening, and drinking in what was said.

Would he never go? Had he then determined to wait for the return of the eighth scout? Perhaps he suspected already the identity of Bob Quail. This was a matter that gave Thad considerable concern, for it meant immediate trouble for their comrade; since the moonshiner might have his old-time enmity for the Quail family revived, under the impression that Bob's coming meant danger for himself.

Once Allan arose, and stepped outside the circle of firelight. The mountaineer eyed him with just a trifle of the old suspicion apparently rising again; for Thad could see a nervous twitch to the brown hands that caressed the stock of the repeating rifle.

But if this were so, Phin Dady must have realized that he could have little or nothing to fear from one stripling of that species; for he immediately relapsed into his former careless attitude.

Thad could give a pretty good guess what it was that caused Allan to walk beyond the camp toward the place from which they had earlier in the evening watched the lights appear in the home of Reuben Sparks, as well as the few more humble cabins across the little valley.

Before Bob went away he had arranged a series of flash signals, by means of which he could communicate with his comrades of the patrol. They would not have been true Boy Scouts if they had not before now learned how to wigwag with flags, or lanterns, as well as use a looking-glass in the sun in heliograph telegraphy.

And so Allan, desirous of ascertaining whether all went well with the absent chum, was now starting out, lantern in hand, to learn whether he could get in communication with Bob.

Possibly some of Phin's followers might be in hiding close by, and witness these maneuvers with astonishment, not unmixed with suspicion. Thad concluded that it would be best to take the bull by the horns. If he confided in Old Phin, the other was apt to discount the news when told by his men.

"You remember that I told you," he remarked, "how Boy Scouts are taught to send messages by waving flags, just as they do in real armies; and at night time by means of lighted lanterns. Well, we never lose a chance to practice; and the boy you saw go out just now arranged to talk with the one who is across the valley."

"Huh!" grunted the mountaineer; and from that Thad concluded that he had allayed any suspicions that may have arisen in his mind.

"If you'd care to see how it's done, why, we can walk out, and watch the scout who has the lan-

tern?" the patrol leader went on to say; though secretly hoping Old Phin might not evince enough interest to disturb himself.

Sometimes a bold move serves better than extreme caution. It seemed so in this case, at least, for the moonshiner, after making a slight move, as though to get up, appeared to think better of it, for he settled back again.

"I kin understand jest 'bout how it air dun, younker," he said. "Now tell me some more 'bout how yuh larn thet thar thing o' savin' a pal thet's been nigh drownded, or else cut a artery in his leg with a ax. I reckon now, that's 'bout the neatest trick I done ever heard on."

Being brim full of the subject, which always appealed to him more than he could tell, the young patrol leader immediately launched out into a description of the matters that seemed to have deeply interested even this rough old mountaineer.

Then he went a step further, and told how the scouts entered into the most amusing, as well as profitable, competitions among themselves. He described a water boiling test, where those in competition are given just three matches, and with an empty tin pail in hand, start at a signal to see which one can build his fire, fill his tin vessel at least two-thirds full of water, and have this actually boiling.

Perhaps that old moonshiner never spent a more interesting hour or so than by the camp-fire of the

Boy Scouts; at any rate he certainly could not look back to one that must have been more profitable to him in every way.

Finally he arose as if to go; and about the same time Allan returned, with the lighted lantern in his hand.

"Did yuh git him?" asked Old Phin, with some show of eagerness.

"Yes, we held quite a little talk, and I guess he must have used up a handful of matches telling me what a pleasant time he had. Right now he's on his way to camp, and ought to get here inside of an hour."

Allan said this as though there could not be anything to conceal. He took a leaf from the example set by Thad. The latter knew that in all probability there had been more to the wigwag talk than Allan chose to state; but he was willing to wait until a more propitious time to hear it.

Taken in all, he believed they had come through the operation of baiting Phin Dady much better than any one could have expected. The old man was interested in what he had heard; and only for the fact that he bore a deadly hatred for the family of young Bob Quail, they would have little to fear from the king of the moonshiners, whose influence among the other mountaineers was such that he could easily sway them one way or the other at will.

Thad caught a wink when he looked into the face

of the Maine boy. It told him that Allan had news to tell, which Bob had sent on ahead, knowing how anxious his chums would be to hear whether he had met with any measure of success or not in his undertaking.

When Thad turned around again he found that Old Phin had slipped away, taking advantage of their attention being directed for a minute toward the scout who had just come into camp with the lantern swinging at his side.

And Thad heaved a sigh of genuine relief when he found that this was so.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE RETURN OF THE EIGHTH SCOUT.

"He's gone!" exclaimed Bumpus; and it would have been hard to tell whether relief or regret lay back of his words; for some of the boys, forgetting the peril that might hang over the head of Bob White, did the moonshiner know of his presence, and his mission to the Blue Ridge, only considered the entertainment afforded by having Old Phin at their fire.

"And I guess the old feller's got enough information in his head to last him a long spell," remarked Giraffe.

"Say, p'raps he's seriously considerin' starting a troop of Boy Scouts here in the Blue Ridge country," suggested Step Hen, who sometimes did have brilliant ideas flash through his brain.

There was considerable of a laugh at this proposition, which struck the boys as about as absurd as anything they had heard for a long time.

"Wonder how our real scoutmaster, Dr. Philander Hobbs'd like to take the job?" chuckled Davy Jones. "He thought he had trouble enough on his hands when he ran up against a few hard cases, like Giraffe and Step Hen here; but they'd be just pie alongside the strappin' mountain kids we've seen."

"Well," remarked Thad, "you never can tell what might happen. Even those boys have got something in them that can be brought out, if only one knows how to go about it. Don't you forget, fellows, that some of the greatest men this country has ever known, were born among the mountains. And right now there may be a future president of the United States within ten miles of where we sit."

"Hear! hear!" cried Step Hen, pretending to clap his hands in applause.

"Huh! nearer than that, mebbe," declared Bumpus, mysteriously swelling out his chest and looking every inch the hero; "how would the name of Cornelius Jasper Hawtree sound to you? We've

never had a President Hawtree; but that ain't no reason we never will, is it? Tell me that."

"Give it up," sang out Davy Jones.

"Anyhow, it'd sound more distinguished than plain Jones," retorted Bumpus.

"My name isn't Plain Jones, it's David Alexander Constantine Josephus, and a few more that, to tell the honest truth; I've forgot," the other went on.

Thad and Allan drew apart from all this mimic warfare, in which the fun-loving scouts liked to indulge from time to time.

"Then you did talk with Bob?" asked the former, with some show of eagerness in his voice.

"Yes," replied Allan, "it was great fun too. Waited a little while before I could get the first answer to all my waving; but in the end I saw a flash, like a match had been struck, and then we got in touch."

"What did Bob have to tell?" asked the patrol leader.

"He met his little cousin, all right, just as they had arranged," Allan went on to say. "And she must have told him something that has made our chum wild with delight, for he says the trip paid him twenty times over. Just what it was he didn't try to tell me, saying it would have to keep till he got to camp."

"Well, we can give a pretty good guess what it must be," Thad observed.

"You mean that Bertha has looked, and made a discovery among the papers in her guardian's safe; is that it, Thad?"

"Just about; but we'll have to quit guessing, and just wait till he comes in," said the scoutmaster, who knew just how to take a grip upon himself, and appear patient, where some of the other boys would have fretted, and worried greatly.

"He oughtn't to be more'n an hour, at the most," suggested Allan.

"Not unless something happens to him, which we hope it won't," replied Thad.

"You don't think now, do you," demanded the other, "that Old Phin might take a notion to waylay him, just to have a look at the eighth scout?"

"I've thought of that, but made up my mind that so far the moonshiner can have no suspicion who Bob is. And that being the case, Allan, you can see he wouldn't be apt to bother himself to lie in wait for him. I hope not, anyhow. It'd sure upset some of the plans we're trying so hard to fix. And it might spell trouble with a big T for Bob."

"He's a good fellow, all right," remarked Allan, not in the least jealous because his particular chum seemed drawn more than ever toward the Southern boy.

"That's right," answered Thad, quickly; "and we've just got to stand back of him, no matter what happens. I guess that if some of the boys' parents had had even half a suspicion that we'd run up against such a combination as this, they wouldn't have given their consent so easily to our coming!"

"I suppose that would have been the case with Bumpus and several others," the Maine boy went on; "but I've seen so much of this sort of thing up in the pine wood that it isn't new to me. Not that it doesn't give me a thrill, all right, whenever I think of what we're doing here, and how we had that man sitting at our fire, the worst moonshiner of the whole Blue Ridge, I guess. And Thad, you did give him a treat, the way you talked. I could see that he took considerable stock in all you said. And you opened his eyes some, believe me, with all the wonderful things you reeled off."

"Wonderful to him, Allan, but the plain every day truth to the rest of us. But I've always heard that there is a spark of good even in the worst man living; and perhaps his weakness for boys may be the soft spot in Old Phin Dady, the moonshiner's heart."

They presently went back to the others, and joined in the general conversation, which, quite naturally enough, was pretty much confined to the visit of the mountaineer, what he had spoken about, his suspicions, and above all the strange interest he had

taken in Thad's account of the Boy Scout movement.

"Hello! there!" said a voice; and they saw Bob White stalk into camp.

One look at the face of the Southern boy told Thad that he had indeed made a profitable trip, for he saw a smile there, such as had seldom marked it in the past.

They quickly made room for him by the fire; while several of the boys scouted around, to make sure that no spies lurked in the undergrowth, listening to all that was said.

The fire crackled merrily, and looked very cheerful, as the ring of faces turned inquiringly toward Bob White. He knew they were anxious to hear what he had accomplished; and, as there were no longer any secrets to be kept from the balance of the patrol, all having been taken into his confidence, the Southern boy hesitated no longer.

"I found no trouble getting across the valley," he began; "though once I had to lie low, when two men passed by. From what I heard them say, I knew they were some of the moonshiners, and that they had been ordered to take up positions somewhere, and stand guard. They seemed to be all at sea about the nature of the danger, and yet when Old Phin gave the alarm, they knew what they had to do."

"We ought to tell you in the start, Bob," said

Thad, "that we had Phin Dady sitting right where you are now; and that he stayed more than a full hour in camp."

"Yes," broke in Bumpus," and filling up on the stuff Thad gave him, all about the heaps of things Boy Scouts are supposed to do. He liked it, too, sure as you live, Old Phin did; and we reckon he's got a sneakin' notion of startin' a troop right here, some fine day."

Bob White appeared to be astonished, and demanded to hear the whole story before he went on with his own experiences. This was presently told, and the one who had been absent at the time looked thoughtful when he heard the conclusion.

"It may work for good, who knows?" he remarked, as though speaking to himself. "He's a strange man, is Old Phin; a hard case in most ways; but p'raps now he has got a soft spot in his flinty old heart for boys. He's a daughter of his own but no sons. And that kind of men generally take to boys best."

"If they do, it's because they don't know what boys are like," suggested Bumpus.

"Now go on and tell us what you did," observed Thad. "Was your cousin at the place you told her about?"

"Yes, it was a little arbor in the garden that I knew well," remarked Bob, tenderly. "She was right glad to see me again, suh; and while she

wouldn't tell me all I wanted to know, I'm mighty sure Reuben Sparks is cruel to her. She has been anything but happy; and always dreamin' of the time when I'd come back to see her, and take her to my mother."

"Did she do what you asked her?" asked Thad, seeing that Bob was apt to lose the thread of his narrative in letting his thoughts stray back to his meeting with little Bertha, whom he loved like a sister.

"She did, suh, took a chance to peep through some of the papers in the safe of Mistah Sparks; and believe me, she gave me a shock when she said there was one hidden in a little compartment, that seemed to have been signed by her own father. I asked her some more questions, and I'm almost sure that it's a will which Reuben Sparks kept hidden away, but which something or other has prevented him from destroying these four years and more, since my uncle died."

"If you only could get that in your hands, and it turned out to be all you think, seems to me you might do about what you wanted with old Reuben," Thad remarked.

"Given another day, and good luck, suh, and I surely expect to have the same in my possession. Then I can shape my plans; but one thing sure, my cousin will go back to Cranford with me!" and

Bob smote the palm of his left hand with his doubled right fist, to emphasize his remark.

No one seemed a particle sleepy. Indeed, they had never been more wide awake in their lives. Even Davy Jones, filled with the spirit of mischief that seemed to take possession of him every once in so often, climbed the tree under which they had built their camp-fire, and swung himself from limb to limb; now with his hands but just as frequently by his toes; as though he wanted to prove the truth of what that learned professor by the name of Darwin always declared, that we were descended from a race of monkeys.

The rest were lying around in the most comfortable attitudes they could find.

"Oh! say, come down out of that, Davy; you make me tired with your everlasting pranks. Take a drop, won't you, please?" called out Bumpus.

Hardly had he spoken than there was a whoop, and Davy landed squarely in the middle of the now smouldering fire, sending the brands to the right and to the left in a hurricane of sparks.

The seven scouts threw themselves backward to avoid contact with the scattered red embers, while Davy scrambled out of his fiery bed with furious alacrity.

CHAPTER XV.

THE FLICKERING TORCH TALK.

"PUT me out! somebody give me a rub down the back! I'm on fire!"

Nobody doubted Davy's excited words, as he danced wildly about, slapping first at a smouldering spark on the right leg of his khaki trousers; and then furiously attacking another burning spot on the sleeve of his coat; only to throw his campaign hat down, and jump on it, under the belief that it was threatened with immediate destruction.

Some of the other scouts had managed to scramble to their feet about this time; and seeing that they were not in danger themselves, could afford to lend a hand in order to save the garments of the unlucky Jones boy.

"Now your suit's a fine sight!" ejaculated Step Hen.

"Perfectly dreadful!" remarked Smithy, with a shudder; for to the mind of this member of the patrol, with his ideas of what neatness stood for, no punishment could have exceeded such a catastrophe as the one that had overtaken Davy.

But after finding that his neck had not been dislocated by his fall; and that, while there would be a few holes here and there about his clothes, they were still fairly presentable, Davy only grinned with his customary good nature.

"You certain sure *are* the limit;" declared Bumpus, surveying the other with a frown on his rosy face. "Better grow a tail, and be done with it. Then you could take your monkey-shines to the woods, where they'd be appreciated."

"Now that's what I call the unkindest cut of all," replied Davy. "I leave it to the crowd if I wasn't only obeyin' orders? Didn't you call out to me to come down? Well, didn't I?"

"Huh! but you needn't a spilt our fire that way," grumbled Bumpus, who however was secretly just as much amused over the affair as any of the rest. "When I say 'come down' you needn't think I mean for you to obey as fast as that. Reckon you must a tried some dodge that wasn't as easy as it looked, and you lost your grip."

"Here's what did it for me," said Davy, stooping, and picking up a piece of broken limb, which Thad remembered seeing fall at the same time the boy scattered the embers of the fire. "Rotten as punk, and went back on me. But don't you believe for a minute because I was hangin' head down right then, I struck that way. Easiest thing in the world to turn a flip-flap in the air. I sat down in that fire;

that's why my pants got the worst of the burns. And say, do I limp when I walk, because I'm feeling a little sore?"

"Not much more'n usual," remarked Bumpus, cheerfully.

This ridiculous adventure on the part of Davy set them all to talking again. Of course previous efforts in the same line, and, carried out by the same artist, had to be hauled out of their concealment, and made to do duty again, with sundry additions; for what story can there be but what is strengthened every time it is told?

So many strange things were taking place all around them that it was little wonder the boys declared they did not feel a bit sleepy, even when the patrol leader told them they ought to lie down and get some rest.

"And when everything else fails," declared Step Hen, "why, Davy, here, can always be counted on to furnish music for the band."

"Yes, waltz music," added Giraffe; "anyway, that's what he thought he was giving us, the way he kicked around. P'raps, now, he believed he was doing the turkey trot, all by himself."

But to all these taunts Davy made no response. Truth to tell he seemed to be the sleepiest member of the set, and was seen to yawn numerous times. In this way he managed to start some of the others

going, so that by degrees they were all exhibiting evidences of wanting to give up.

Then there came the job of trying to make themselves fairly comfortable. They had considered this matter before, and settled upon plans for the campaign. There would be no cabin roof over their heads on this night, only the branches of the big tree; but since there seemed little likelihood of rain falling, they did not think they would miss this.

It was the bed part that gave them the most trouble. They had scoured the immediate vicinity, and each scout had secured whatever he could lay his hands on in the shape of weeds, or grass, or even small branches from the tree—anything to make the ground seem a bit softer to his body.

One liked this spot, while another had entirely different ideas; but coached by Allan, who knew all about sleeping out without shelter, they one and all kept their feet toward the fire, because that was the part first affected by the cooling night air.

Several of them were already stretched out, for while they had arranged a system of sentry duties, Allan was to take the first spell.

He and Thad stood looking at the actions of the other scouts as they moved their rude beds here and there, striving to find spots where there were no roots sticking up, that would poke into their sides or backs.

"They're a great bunch, all told?" remarked

Allan, with a wide smile, as he saw Bumpus slily stealing some of the bed of Step Hen, whose back was toward him, adding it, handfuls at a time, to his own scanty stock.

"The finest ever," added Thad, warmly. "I don't see how we could have improved on this patrol, if we'd searched through Cranford with a fine tooth comb. Every one of them has his failings, just as all of us do; but they're as loyal and happy-go-lucky a lot of boys as ever any one knew. And Allan, I expect we'll have some glorious times ahead of us, if we go up into Maine with you, later on. That hasn't been fully settled yet, you understand; the question of expense has to be met, as well as getting away from our school, if it takes up by the middle of September. But we're all hoping, and pulling for it just as hard as we can."

"Won't it be great now," Allan went on to say, "if Bob does find that paper he thinks Reuben's been keeping all these years, when he hadn't ought to have let it stay unburned a minute? What d'ye suppose makes a smart scamp like that ever do such a silly thing?"

"I couldn't tell you, only I've heard my guardian say more than a few times that the cleverest scoundrel is apt to make a blunder. If that's true then I guess this Reuben made his when he kept that paper, just to look at it once in a while, and shake hands with himself over his cuteness."

"Will you take a little stroll around with me before lying down?" asked Allan, who was to have the first watch.

"Might as well," returned the other, casting a glance over toward the balance of the patrol, still squirming more or less, as they tried to make comfortable nests for themselves. "By that time, perhaps they'll be asleep, and I can drop off without being made to listen to Bumpus' complaining, when Step Hen takes back his stolen goods. Come along, then, Allan."

They first of all walked back along the road in the direction whence they had come to the strange valley where Reuben lived, a half-way station between the secret haunts of the moonshiners, and civilization.

"What's that up yonder; looks to me like a torch moving?" remarked Thad, as he elevated his head, so as to gaze upward, along the face of the mountain.

"It *is* a torch, right you are," Allan went on to say; "somebody must be picking his way along among those rocks. I'd think he'd sure need a good light on such a black night as this."

"But I guess you're wrong about that," Thad added, quickly; "see, he's waving his light, now back, and again forward, just so many times. There, he gives it a downward flash that must mean the end of a word; and then he goes on."

"Why, to be sure, it's as plain as anything that he's signalling to somebody on the other mountain. Yes, Thad, look there, and you can see another light move in answer to that first one."

"Even that don't seem to be all," remarked the patrol leader, seriously. "Here's a third light back of us; and upon my word I can see a fourth ever so far off."

"Looks like all the moonshiners in the mountains might be out in force, and having a jolly old talk among themselves. Wonder what they find to talk about?" Alian hazarded.

"Chances are ten to one it's us they're discussing," said Thad. "Old Phin like as not, is giving his orders. Thought he grinned a little when I was telling how scouts communicated with each other. He knew all about that, the sly old rascal did; and this has been going on for years and years before Boy Scouts were ever heard of."

"Thad, they're all around us; we're surrounded by these moonshiners, with their handy guns; and if Old Phin says we've got to stay up here in the mountains, why, it's going to be a case of being marooned for us. We don't dare run, because they'd take that for a sure evidence of guilt, and pepper us for all that's out. So, there's nothing to be done but stick it out, seems to me."

"Well, we ought to be satisfied," remarked Thad, grimly. "Marooned or not, it was our intention to

stay around here until Bob had settled those two matters of importance that fetched him down this way."

"Sure, I'd pretty nigh forgotten that," declared the Maine boy, more cheerfully. "So let the mountain men shake their blessed old torches at each other all they choose, and tell how the trap is to be made snug as all get-out; we'll just play the innocent, and try to find out what we want to know. Shall we go back to camp now, Thad?

"Just as you say," returned the other. "Nothing more to see out this way. We know that Old Phin isn't ready to look on us as friends yet. He can't get over the suspicions the sight of our khaki uniforms woke up in his soul. But so far we hadn't ought to complain with the way things have gone. Hope it'll keep on to the end; and that our Bob will get all he aims for, find his daddy, and take the little girl cousin back to Cranford with him."

"And if it all goes to the good, say, p'raps we won't have a feather to stick in our hats, all right, Thad! We'll never get over talking about this thing. But will it go straight; that's the question?"

"You never can tell," replied the other, softly, and encouragingly. "We're going to do our level best; and leave the rest. Good-night, Allan; wake Giraffe at the end of an hour, and caution him to keep a good watch. I come next in line, you know."

With these parting words Thad stepped softly

into camp, glanced at the various forms of the scouts stretched in favorite positions, some even lying on their backs; and then with a smile the patrol leader lay down upon the rude bed he had made for himself, out of such material as offered.

In five minutes he was asleep, and forgetful of all the strange events that had marked their strenuous hike into the mountains of the Old North State.

CHAPTER XVI.

CLIMBING THE MOUNTAIN.

"HEY! what's all this mean; morning, and nobody woke me up, to let me stand my trick at the wheel! I don't think you're treatin' me fair, that's what, fellers!" and Bumpus Hawtree sat up, rubbing his eyes as he looked around him in wonder.

The fact of the matter was it had been decided that they could get on very well without calling on the fat boy to stand sentry duty. Most of them knew how unreliable Bumpus was when it came to such things, no matter how sincere his desire to please might be; and Thad had secretly arranged to leave him out.

And so Bumpus had not known a single thing of what was going on until, smelling the delightful

fumes of boiling coffee, he had opened his eyes to find most of his comrades moving about, and breakfast well on the way, under the supervision of Giraffe and Allan.

"The whole blessed night gone, and me a sleepin' for all get-out," complained the stout member of the patrol, as he climbed to his feet, and stretched. "Well, it looks good, anyway. Nothin' happened, after all. Nobody ain't been kidnapped by the moonshiners, have they, because I can count—what, there don't seem to be only seven here! Somebody's gone, and yet I don't miss any familiar face."

"Oh! you only forgot to count yourself, Bumpus," laughed Thad.

"Well, that goes to show how modest I am, you see," chuckled the other, as he started toward the spring to get the sleep out of his eyes by the use of some cold water.

"Yes, as modest as a spring violet," sang out Step Hen; "but how about that President Cornelius Jasper Hawtree business? Seems to me any feller that hopes to assume that high office ain't so very retiring after all."

But Bumpus refused to be drawn into any discussion of his merits as a candidate, at least so early in the morning. He came back presently, asking for a towel, which he had forgotten to carry along with him. But as breakfast was announced just about that time, everything else was forgotten in

the pleasant task of appeasing their clamorous appetites.

While they ate they talked, and many were the schemes invented by some of the ingenious scouts, all looking to the undoing of the enemy, as they chose to consider the combination of Reuben Sparks and Old Phin Dady.

Bob asked that they remain over one more night in that camp, and there was not a dissenting voice raised. They were fairly comfortable, and their haversacks still held a certain amount of food; though Thad did say some of them ought to go skirmishing in the direction of the houses across the valley, to see if there was a chance for buying fresh eggs; breakfast bacon; salt pork; or even grits, as the finer grade of hominy is universally called throughout the entire South.

As for Bob and himself, Thad had laid out a little campaign for the day. He believed that it might pay them to climb up the side of the mountain. This would be looked upon by any of Old Phin's followers, should they see the boys, as in keeping with what the patrol leader had told the moonshiner about the doings and ambitions of Boy Scouts. There need not be anything suspicious about such a move, when Thad had time and again declared that one of the main objects of their selecting this part of the country for their hike, had been the desire to climb mountains.

As to the benefits to be gained, they could at least have a good birdseye view of the entire region, the queer bowl-shaped little valley, at the further end of which nestled the pretentious house of Reuben Sparks, and the nearby cabins; as well as the back trail.

Besides, possibly they might get some sort of information with regard to what the moonshiners were doing. Most of these men lived in the little ramshackle cabins they had occasionally passed on the mountain road; where a few hens, a razor-back hog or two, and possibly a slab-sided mule, constituted the sole possessions of the poor whites. But then, others doubtless had homes deeper in the depths of the great elevations that reared their rocky heads heavenward. These were the parties who, like Old Phin himself, were in demand by the authorities, and who wanted to take as few chances of arrest as possible.

No revenue men could very easily come into that well-watched region without the keen eyes of a mountaineer noticing him. And often the crack of a rifle would be the first sign the daring man might have that he was discovered.

Bob was only too glad of a chance to get off in the company of Thad. He wanted to talk over matters with the other very much, and find out just what the patrol leader thought about the situation.

So, as they climbed steadily, though slowly, up-

ward, they chatted in low tones. Thad had warned his comrade that they must imagine an enemy back of every tree, and act accordingly, so as not to betray themselves by unwise talk.

It was rough going. Plenty of times they had to pull themselves up by main muscular strength, over some rocky obstruction. Then again, perhaps they would have it comparatively easy for a brief interval.

"Here's a plain trail leading upward," remarked Thad, whose eyes had been on the lookout all the time. "Suppose we follow it some. Chances are it'll be easier going, because whoever lives up here would know the softest road."

"That's true," assented Bob; "but we'd best not keep on this same trail too long."

"Why not?" asked the other, looking around at his chum.

"You must know that it sure leads, sooner or later, to some hidden cabin of a man who's got some pretty good reason for keeping away from the beaten road."

"Yes, I guessed that the first thing; and I suppose you mean he'd feel angry some if he saw two fellows in uniform following his trail?" Thad suggested.

"Angry—well, that hardly covers the ground," chuckled Bob. "When these mountain men don't like a thing they start to shooting right off the

handle. Never waste time, suh, in asking questions; they judge things as they see them, and act accordingly. And believe me, Thad, when their guns speak, generally something goes down."

"Well, on the whole I think what you said carries so much weight with me, Bob, that I've lost pretty much all interest in this same trail. It don't look near so attractive as it did; and I wouldn't be surprised if we'd make better time just keeping on straight up the face of the old hill."

They looked at each other, and laughed softly, as though it was mutually understood what meaning Thad intended to convey back of his words.

All the same the dangerous beaten track was immediately forsaken, and once more they set out to climb straight upwards. Occasionally Bob, who seemed more at home in this thing than his companion, as he had lived among the mountains most of his young life; would discover that by taking a side cut they could avoid a hard climb, and in that event the direct line was changed to an oblique one.

The view was at times a fine one, with a stretch of the wild country spread out before them like a panorama. Then again for a quarter of an hour or more they would be unable to see anything, on account of the formation of the mountainside, or it might be the presence of thick foliage on the small trees growing in profusion all around them.

"So far we haven't seen the first sign of a living

thing?" remarked Thad, when they halted to get their breath.

"That's a fact, suh," agreed Bob White, "but we mustn't make up our minds that we haven't been followed and watched at all times. These mountain men can climb like goats, suh. It would make you stare to see one of them go up a cliff that neither of us could dream of climbing. They could keep us in sight right along, and believe me, we would never know a thing about it."

"I can easily understand that, Bob. But it's some wilder up here than ever I believed possible. I saw squirrels in plenty as we came along; some birds flushed from alongside that bank that must have been partridges; and right here's a bunch of feathers, showing where some animal had a fine supper not long since."

Thad dropped down beside the telltale feathers that marked the end of a game bird, and seemed to be examining the ground.

A minute later he looked up.

"I'm not as dead sure about this thing as Allan would be," Thad remarked; "but it doesn't look like fox tracks to me. The claws are too well defined; and I'm of the opinion that it might have been a wildcat, if you happen to have such beasts here in the heart of the Blue Ridge."

"I reckon we do, suh, and mighty fierce fellows too," the Southern lad made answer promptly; "I've

myself met with one when out hunting, and got him too, though he gave me a heap of trouble; and I was sore from the scratches a whole week or so. No doubt you're right, and it was a cat; though I'm surprised that he ate his catch on the ground, instead of in the crotch of a tree."

"Perhaps he was too hungry to wait; or the bird tasted so good he just had to pitch in right away," suggested Thad, picking up one of the feathers, and sticking it in the cord of his campaign hat, boy fashion.

"It's getting pretty nigh dinner time," observed Bob, as he felt for the package of food he had thrust into one of his pockets before starting out, upon the suggestion of the patrol leader, who did not know just how long a time they might be gone.

"Yes, and I supose we've come up about as far as we ought," Thad added, himself feeling the vigorous climb the more because his muscles were not used to anything of that sort. "So, let's drop down right where we are. It's a good enough lunching place. The cat thought so, you can see."

They soon settled in comfortable places, each with a tree to lean his back against while he munched the dry sandwiches that had been hurriedly put together, a little potted ham between crackers, with a slice of cheese thrown in for good measure.

The sun felt warm overhead, but the atmosphere at this altitude was bracing and refreshing indeed,

as mountain air always is. The boys, as they ate, talked incessantly, covering the ground of what they hoped to accomplish, if fortune were only kind enough to favor them, and the moonshiners to allow them to leave the mountains in peace.

Bob was explaining that after all it might be well for him to divide his mission into two parts, and get Bertha disposed of, before thinking of trying to find whether the mysterious prisoner of the moonshiners could really be his dear father, when their conversation was interrupted by a scream from a point close by.

The two boys sprang to their feet, and looked at each other blankly.

"That was a girl called out, Bob!" exclaimed Thad. "We can't tell but what it may be a trap of some kind, but that's a chance we've just got to take. Come on, and we'll soon see what it means!"

CHAPTER XVII.

IN LUCK AGAIN.

Bob was quite as eager as his companion to hurry forward and see what that cry of a girl's voice might mean. Whoever heard of a Southern boy unwilling to act in similar circumstances?

The two of them had noted the quarter from whence the shrill scream came, and were making a bee line for it as fast as the rough nature of the ground permitted.

"Keep back, thar, you ugly critter! Don't you dar' jump at me! Oh! if I could on'y git free, I'd show you!" they heard just beyond the fringe of bushes.

Bursting through these, and the scene lay before them. It was a girl, a real mountain girl too, who had called out. She was half bent over, as though trying all her might to wrench her foot free, for it seemed to be caught in a crevice of the rock, as in a vise.

Not ten feet away from her crouched an ugly wildcat. Its ears were bent backward toward its body; the yellow eyes seemed to glow with an ugly fire; and there could be no doubt but that the animal was getting ready to jump at the girl, possibly angered by the red sunbonnet she wore.

She had managed to pick up a stone, with which she was ready to do battle in case the cat really attacked her. Thad saw this, and admired her grit, even though he believed that she would have suffered dreadfully, had the fight ever come off.

Bob gave a cry of rage as he saw what it all meant. He too snatched up a stone, and made directly for the wildcat, as though such a thing as fear did not enter into his calculations. And Thad,

a little wiser, seeing an excellent club handy, made out to get that in his grip ere following his chum.

Despite the coming of these two new enemies the wildcat showed no sign of beating a retreat. There may have been some reason for this unexpected bravery on the animal's part. Usually it is only when darkness comes that bobcats are dangerous; and in the daytime they will generally retreat before the coming of human foes.

There may have been kittens somewhere close by; and a mother cat will attack anything that moves in defense of her offspring.

But just then Thad was not bothering himself with trying to understand why the fierce beast acted in that altogether remarkable way. What they wanted to do was to influence the animal to leave the neighborhood, and the quicker this were done the better they would be pleased.

"Go slow, Bob!" Thad called out, fearful lest his impulsive comrade dash up so close that in another instant the cat would be upon him, clawing, biting, and doing all manner of damage.

He swung his club in as ferocious a manner as he could, and made all sorts of threatening gestures as he rushed forward.

Thinking that if they approached from two separate quarters the beast might grow more or less confused, and possibly slink away, Thad did not

follow directly in the track of his friend, but made a little detour.

Bob came to a pause. He was not more than a dozen feet away from the beast now, and there was danger that if he closed in any more the expected collision must take place.

Thad saw him draw his arm back. Undoubtedly Bob meant to hurl the heavy rock he had snatched up. If he missed his aim, he would then be entirely unprotected. But then Bob had pitched on a base-ball team several seasons, and was said to have a very clever delivery, with the faculty of getting the ball over the rubber with clock-like precision. And a crouching wildcat, only a dozen feet away, is a large enough object to be counted a sure thing by an experienced ball player.

So even as Thad looked and wondered, he saw Bob let drive. And when the rock actually struck the cat between its glaring eyes, hurling it over backwards, Thad could not help letting out a yell.

"Good shot, Bob!" he cried. "Get another, quick, for he's coming after you like hot cakes!"

He himself was closing in on the cat all the time he shouted after this manner. In another moment they were all in a confused bunch, the enraged and wounded wildcat screaming and snarling; Thad pounding away every chance he got; Bob kicking wildly at the animal, as he looked for a chance to

get hold of another stone; and the whole making quite a lively circus.

Several times Thad landed with such a will on the side of the springing wildcat that the wretched beast was knocked clean over. But with a desperation that was simply astonishing it would get together, and come flying back again, as though it really possessed the nine lives its tribe is given credit for.

Of course this could not last long. The game was too one-sided, with two against one; and in the end the cat was glad to jump into the bushes, with a parting expression of hatred in the form of a snarl.

The panting boys stood and looked at each other. Each of them had a few rents in their khaki trousers; and might have been served even worse only that their putties protected the lower part of their limbs.

"Whew! that was a hot time!" gasped Thad. "Did you see how many times I bowled the thing over, and only to have to defend myself again? Give me a mad wildcat for gameness. They haven't their equal going, pound for pound."

"And I hit him when I threw that stone; I'm proud of that shot, suh!" declared the Southern boy, with a grim smile.

"Say, it was a right smart throw, all right; but s'pose yuh come and help me outen this trap now, strangers," came from the mountain girl.

As they turned toward her, and advanced, Thad saw immediately that she was not the little Bertha whom he had looked upon, sitting beside Reuben Sparks, and with her golden hair, seeming very much like a fairy.

This girl was slender, and with coarse, black hair. She was garbed in common homespun clothes, and wore shoes that were doubtless much too large for her feet. One of her ankles had been caught tightly in the crevice of the rock. She might have managed to extricate herself if given a little time; but the sudden appearance of that ugly fighting wildcat had upset her; so that she had twisted and squirmed until her foot was held as though in a blacksmith's vise.

Bob in his usual impetuous way might have been impelled to tug at that imprisoned foot, and add to her sufferings; but Thad, who was cooler, set about discovering just how it was gripped; then, as gently as he could he gave it a sudden turn, and the thing was done.

The girl uttered a little scream as a pain shot through her ankle; but then she realized that the way the boy had gone about it was the right one. Results count every time. When a man succeeds, the path he has taken is looked upon as a shining example to the rising generation; should he fail, the same route is pointed out as beset with unsurmountable difficulties.

"I'm right glad you kim along in time," the girl remarked, as her black eyes scanned the faces of the two boys who had done her such a good turn.

"Had you done anything to the cat; or was it just crazy for a fight?" asked Bob, as he looked more closely at the angular girl; and Thad thought he could detect that in his manner to tell he might have recognized her.

"'Pears like it was jest brim full of scrap, mister," she went on. "I was acomin' down ther side o' the mounting, paying 'tention to my own business, when I jest made er fool o' myself, like ye see, an' gut a foot fast atween the rocks. Then the critter showed up, and started makin' a row. I tried all I knowed how to break loose, but it was no go. An' I was jest agwine to hit the animal atween the eyes if it jumped me, when you-uns arriv. But I'm glad ye kim. 'Tain't nice to git yuh face all clawed to ribbands by cat's claws. Yep, I'm glad ye helped me outen it."

Thad saw that she was a character, this girl of the Blue Ridge. Rough and uncouth, she might be, still she possessed the qualities that real heroines were once made out of in the days of Joan of Arc.

Doubtless she must be the daughter of one of the poor "white trash" mountaineers who spend their time between making moonshine whiskey, and dodging revenue men. It struck Thad at the moment that perhaps, since they had been enabled to do her

a good turn, she might be willing to assist them. Such a girl ought to know a good deal of what was going on back in the mountains. Her people must talk about the strange things that happened; perhaps she might be able to even tell Bob something about the prisoner who was said to be kept up there somewhere, working at the sour-mash in the never raided Still of Phin Dady.

With this bright idea in his mind Thad decided that fortune had indeed played another nice trick upon them, and one that would perhaps be to their advantage.

"Do you live near here; and will you be able to limp home?" he asked; for he saw that the ankle was somewhat swollen, and must pain more or less; although the girl scorned to show it by her manner.

"A right smart ways off from heah, stranger," she replied; "but then they be some o' my friends nigh this, who'll take keer o' me. Ye did hit up that ere onary cat some handsome, an' I shore think it won't want to tackle a pore gal ther next time it sees one."

"Perhaps we might help you along to the home of your friends," said Thad.

She looked at him keenly, for even the daughters of moonshiners grow to be suspicious of those whom they do not know.

"'Tain't no need, stranger; I kin take keer o' my-

self, I reckon. Not that I ain't feelin' 'bliged to ye, fur offerin'. I kain't furgit thet ye done me a good turn. Mebbe I ain't good lookin' like thet leetle cousin o' yours, Bob Quail; but it's the on'y face I'll ever hev; and no gal likes to be scratched an' gouged bad by the pizen claws o' a wildcat."

"Will you tell your father about this, Polly?" asked Bob, excitedly, Thad thought.

"'Pears like I hadn't orter keep it from him," she replied, slowly, watching the expressive and handsome face of the young Southerner closely. "Thems as don't think Phin Dady keers fur his fambly, but they don't know. Reckons he'd jest 'bout lay down his life fur *me,* pore looker as I am!"

Thad drew a big breath. Really things were rushing forward by leaps and bounds now. For not only had the girl recognized his companion, who wished to keep his identity under cover while in the mountains; but this same Polly, as Bob called her, had now disclosed herself to be the daughter of the moonshiner, Old Phin Dady!

CHAPTER XVIII.

POLLY GIVES HER PROMISE.

"I'm going to ask you a great favor, Polly," said Bob, earnestly.

"Then hit it up right smart, an' tell me," replied the girl, calmly, though Thad could see her dark, expressive face light up.

Polly had her share of the curiosity that is the heritage of her sex.

"You say you feel thankful that we happened along in time to drive that cat off; and you'd be willing to do something for us in return?" Bob went on.

"Thet's right, Bob Quail," returned the girl of the mountains sturdily. "Reckons as how it'd on'y be fair. What ye want me to do?"

"First of all, please don't whisper it to anybody around here that I have come back," the boy asked in his earnest tones; "and least of all to your father. You know he used to feel right sore against all my family, because my father in trying to do his sworn duty by the Government, ran up against the moonshine boys."

"Oh! thet's easy promised, Bob Quail," she re-

plied, readily enough; "I kin keep a close tongue atween my teeth, ef I happens to be on'y a gal. But I kin see thet ain't all yer gwine to ask o' me."

"But everything else hinges on that, Polly," returned Bob; "and I'm glad you'll forget that you saw one of the Quail family. They're not in any too good odor in this part of the country. Now, you're wondering, I reckon, why I ever dared come back, after two years. Well, there were reasons that pulled me into the danger zone, Polly. One of them was—Bertha, my little cousin."

Polly smirked, and nodded her wise head.

"I cud a guessed thet, Bob Quail," she remarked. "Sumbody must a ben tellin' ye thet she ain't as happy as she mout be, thet's it. The old miser, he's cross as a bear with a sore head; an' I seen Bertha with red eyes more'n a few times. I don't blame ye 'bout wantin' to do somethin'; though I reckons ye'll find it a up-hill job, w'en ye tackle thet old fox."

"But there's a way to get him in a hole, and I believe I've found it," said Bob. "Only, if I'm chased out of the country before I can carry my plans through, you see, all my coming here wouldn't amount to a row of beans. That's one reason why I asked you to keep my secret. But there's another, Polly."

"Yep, they's another," she repeated after him, with her dark eyes fixed on his face, as though she might be able to read what was passing in his mind.

and in this way was prepared to hear his new disclosure.

Thad knew what his comrade meant to say. It was a big risk, but he believed it could be carried through. This girl was no ordinary creature; she had latent possibilities slumbering beneath the surface in her nature, that, as yet, had never been called upon to show themselves. Besides, the girl was grateful to them for what they had done.

"You haven't forgotten what happened here some years ago, Polly," Bob went on. "My father led a party of revenue men into these mountains, meaning to destroy the secret Stills. He never came back. Those who were with him said that he had been shot down in a fierce fight with the moonshiners; and that he had died almost instantly. You haven't forgotten that terrible time, Polly, have you?"

"I reckons not," she muttered, stirring uneasily.

"Well, somehow I never could get myself to believe that my father was really dead. I had one of the revenue men in my pay, and he used to write me every week or so. It was through him I first heard the rumor that the moonshiners were said to have a prisoner up at your father's Still, who was kept constantly under guard, and made to work. They even said he was a revenue man; and that it was a part of the moonshiners' revenge to make him help manufacture the mountain dew, so as to pay up for

the quantities he had destroyed in his raids. You've heard more or less about this, too, haven't you, Polly?"

"Sure I has, Bob Quail," replied the girl.

"Polly, somehow I just can't get it out of my head that this mysterious prisoner of the mountains might be my own father; that he was badly wounded, and not killed in that fight; that the moonshiners nursed him back to health; and ever since he's been kept under guard. Do you know if that is so? I ask you to tell me, because it would mean a great deal to me, and to my poor mother at home in the North."

Polly shook her head in the negative.

"I jest can't say as to thet," she answered, soberly; "I done hears a heap 'bout some man as they has kep' a long time up thar, adoin' of the chores, an' never without a gun clost to his head; but I ain't never seed him. I gives ye my word on thet, Bob Quail."

"But Polly, you *could* see him if you tried real hard, couldn't you?" the boy went on, in an anxious tone.

She looked at him. The eager expression on poor Bob's face would have moved a heart of stone; and Polly was surely deeply touched.

"I reckons I cud," she answered, steadily; while in her black eyes stole a glow that gave Thad a curious feeling; for he began to believe that they

had after all come upon an unexpected and valuable ally, right in the household of the chief enemy.

"Think what it means to me, Polly," Bob suggested, knowing how best to appeal to her sympathies. "Put yourself in my place, and tell me what you would do if it was your own father who was held a prisoner, and you had long believed him dead? Do you blame me for coming back to these mountains to try and learn the truth; and if it should turn out to be all I dream it may, of attempting in some way to bring about his release. Would you blame me, Polly?"

"Sure I wudn't, Bob Quail," she replied.

"And will you help me find out?" he went on, feverishly.

"Seein's I owe ye a heap, 'case o' what ye done fur me this day, I'm gwine to say jest what ye wants me to," the girl returned.

With an almost inarticulate cry Bob seized her hand, and gave it a squeeze.

"Oh! you don't know how happy you've made me by saying that, Polly!" he exclaimed. "And if it *should* turn out to be my poor father, won't you try and help me get him free? He'll never come back here again to bother your people; I give you my word for that, Polly, sure I do. Will you help me do it?"

"Thet's asking a hull lot, Bob Quail," she mut-

tered, doubtfully, as though she realized the magnitude of the task he would put upon her shoulders. "It's wantin' me to go agin my own dad. If so be thar is a revenue kep' up thar to the Still, it's *his* doin's. An' 'less he gives the word, thar ain't nobody dar's to let that man go free. An' now ye arsk me to play agin my own people. It's a big thing ye want done, Bob Quail. I dunno; I dunno!"

But Thad could see she was wavering. He believed that if Bob only pressed his point he must win out.

"Listen, Polly," and Bob caught hold of her wrist as he spoke, as though to hold her attention better; "more than two long years this man has been held there, the sport and plaything of the moonshiners, and made to do their rough work. It must have broken his spirit sadly. And surely your father's desire for revenge should be wholly satisfied by now. Think of my mother, mourning him as dead all this time, Polly. Just imagine her wonderful joy if he came back to her again alive and in the flesh! Oh! don't talk to me about the risks I am running in just coming here; gladly would I put my life in danger ten times over, if I knew there was a chance to find him, and bring him home with me. That is what *you* would do, Polly; and perhaps some day, when sorrow and trouble come to you, I may be able to do you a good turn,

even as you are going to do for me now; because something tells me you are, Polly!"

That settled it. Bob had gone about the matter in just the right way to reach the moonshiner's daughter's heart. No doubt she often thought of the black day that might come at any time, when those never sleeping Government agents would capture Old Phin, and he look a long sentence in the face. Yes, it would be worth something to know that they had a friend in court when that time rolled around.

"Yes, I'm agwine to help ye, Bob Quail," she said, slowly. "I don't jest know yet how far I kin go; but anyways I'll promise to find out who thet prisoner up at the Still kin be. Then, mebbe I mout think it over, an' reckon as it's jest like ye sez, an' he's shore be'n punished enuff. Thet's all I'll tell ye right now."

"Well, it's mighty fine of you to say as much as that, Polly, and I want you to know I appreciate it more than I can tell you," the Southern boy went on, his dark handsome face radiant with renewed hope, as his heart beat high in the belief that his loftiest dreams might after all come true.

"I hope that foot won't keep you from walking?" Thad thought to remark just then.

This caused Bob to remember that he had a chum near by, and he hastened to say:

"This is one of my best friends, Thad Brewster,

Polly. We belong to the troop of Boy Scouts encamped down below. Perhaps you have heard your father speak of them? He was in our camp more than an hour last night, and my chum here seemed to interest him a heap in telling all about what scouts aim to do in the world."

"Yep, I heerd 'bout hit," the girl replied, as she gave Thad a short nod; "an' he shore was takin' sum stock in wat he done heerd. My dad, he allers liked boys better'n he did gals. Lost three on 'em, he did, an' every one died with his boots on! But ye needn't git skeered 'bout this hyar foot ahurtin' me none. We knows what kin' o' stuff to put on a sprain, as'll take ther swellin' down right smart. See, I kin walk jest as good as I ever cud. An' I'll find out fur ye 'bout thet man up to the Still, sure I will, Bob."

"When can I see you again, Polly?" Bob asked, anxiously. "You know time is worth a heap to me right now. Say soon, please; sometime to-night, if you can; and it'll help a lot. I'll never be able to sleep a wink now till I know the truth."

"Mout as well put her through on ther lightnin' express as not," she replied. "I reckons I kin promise ye to-night. An' I knows whar yer camp lays, 'case I arsked my dad. Thort I mout happen thet way, an' see what boys looked like as was dressed in smart close. It's gwine to be a hard job, seems like, an' mebbe I carn't git 'roun' till late, but

I'll be thar, Bob Quail! Ye done ther right thing by me, an' Polly Dady don't forgit."

Then turning her back on the two boys, the mountain girl swung herself along the rough face of the hillside with a perfect confidence in her ability to keep her footing that only a chamois might have exceeded.

And Thad, looking at his chum, saw that the other's face was wreathed in a smile such as had long been a stranger there.

"The best day's work I ever did, Thad!" exclaimed Bob, as he seized his chum's hand, and squeezed it convulsively. "Something just tells me Polly is going to be my good fairy, and bring me the greatest gift that ever could be—the knowledge that my dear father lives."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SILENT VIDETTE.

"SHALL we go back the same way we came up?" asked Thad, as they made a start toward returning to the camp down below.

"I think I'd like to try another route," Bob replied. "Some of those places we hit were pretty tough climbing; and you know it's always harder

going down, than up a mountain. Seems to me we'll strike an easier way over to the right here."

"My opinion exactly," Thad declared, ready to fall in with anything which the other proposed, because he was interested heart and soul in the work Bob had cut out for himself—trying to bring more of happiness into the life of little Bertha, his cousin; and finding out whether his long-lost father was still in the land of the living.

They had gone about half of the way, and found that, just as Bob guessed, it was much easier than the other route would have proven, when Thad made a discovery that gave him a little thrill.

"There's a man, Bob!" he exclaimed, suddenly.

"Where?" demanded the other, turning his head around; for he happened to be a trifle in advance of his companion at the time.

"Over yonder, on that rock, and of course with a rifle in sight; for you never see one of these mountaineers without that. I wouldn't be surprised to hear that some of them go to bed with their guns in their arms. Do you see him now, Bob?"

"Yes, and can understand why he's sitting there like that," replied the other, rather bitterly.

"Looks like he might have a touch of the fever and ague, and that with a spell of the shakes on, he wanted to sun himself," suggested Thad; though he knew full well the true explanation was along other lines entirely.

"He's doing sentry duty," remarked Bob, soberly. "You can see, Thad, that from where he lies he has a splendid view of the road we came over?"

"That's a fact, and could even toss a rock down on it if he chose," continued the patrol leader. "I understood that, Bob, and can guess why he was placed there by Old Phin Dady."

"I suppose they're all around us," remarked the Southern boy, "and as I said last night, they've sure got us marooned, all right. We can't move without they're knowing it. Oh! what sort of chance would I have to get him out of this awful country, even if it should turn out to be my father who is the prisoner of the moonshiners? Thad, I reckon it's a forlorn hope after all."

"Well," remarked the other, seeing that Bob needed cheering up again, "even if you only discover that he is alive, that will be great news alone. And when things get to coming your way the style they've been doing lately, believe me, you can hope for the best. Keep your spirits up, Bob. That girl is going to help us more than we ever dreamed of."

"It *was* great luck, our running across Polly; and then the chance to do her a favor, could you beat it? Reckon you're right, Thad; and I'm foolish for letting myself look at the dark side, when things are breaking so splendidly for me."

"That fellow doesn't seem to pay much attention

to us, though I'm sure he knows we're going to pass him by," Thad continued, in a lower voice.

"I used to know a good many of the men around here, and this might be one of the lot; so I hadn't better take any chances of his seeing me too close in the daylight," and with this remark Bob drew the brim of his hat lower over his face.

The man never so much as moved, though the two descending boys passed within thirty feet of where he reclined on the rock, his face turned toward the road that wound in and out of the tangle far below.

Thad believed he could see a pair of sharp eyes under the man's hat, that kept watch over their movements; but there was no hail, or other sign of life from that sphinx-like figure stretched out at length on the sunny rock. Should they have given the mountaineer cause for displaying any activity, no doubt he would be quick to take action.

Thad certainly did not want to strike up a conversation with so morose a man; and especially when his chum wished to keep aloof from him. So they continued along down the side of the mountain, and soon lost sight of the vidette.

Still, the circumstance left a bad feeling behind. It was far from pleasant for the boys to realize how completely they had put themselves in the power of these mountain moonshiners. Just as Bob had so bitterly declared, Old Phin ruled with an iron hand

among the men who lived here among the uplifts; and once he had placed sentries on duty to watch the movements of the scouts, they could neither go forward nor retreat, unless that gaunt moonshiner crooked his finger.

"I don't see how it can be done," Bob broke out later, as they began to draw near the camp again; as though he had been wrestling with some subject, and reached a point where he needed counsel.

"As what?" inquired his comrade.

"Work both ends of the affair at the same time," continued Bob. "Suppose, now, I find that the paper Bertha has seen is the very one I've been hoping to get my hands on; and she comes to me to-night; how can I carry her away, and at the same time stay here to find out about the news Polly will bring me?"

"Now, I'm glad you spoke of that, Bob," Thad declared; "because I've been trying to puzzle out that same thing myself. And I really believe I've hit the only answer."

"Then let me hear it, for goodness sake, please!" exclaimed the other, in a relieved tone; for he well knew that when Thad Brewster said a thing that way, he must feel pretty confident he had the right solution in hand.

"Just as you say, it would be next to impossible to take Bertha away from here, and at the same

time carry out your plans in connection with that other business. That is of the first importance, it seems to me, Bob. This other about Bertha can wait some, if it comes to it."

"Yes, it could, I suppose," admitted the other, slowly. "Bertha is unhappy she says, and he treats her wretchedly; but then he is not really cruel to her. Tell me your plan, Thad, and I'll be ready to stand by it."

"Suppose, then, she brings you that paper, and it turns out to be all you hope for? You can take it away with you, and when we get back to Asheville place it in the hands of some reliable lawyer, who will have Reuben summoned to court with the girl. Then she will never be allowed to go back with him again; and he may consider himself lucky if he gets off without being sent to jail for having withheld a lawful document, and replacing it with a false will, or one that was older."

Bob uttered a cry of delight.

"It sure takes you to think up an answer to every hard, knotty problem, Thad," he cried. "That is just the best thing ever, and I'm willing to try it. Why, for me to take the law in my hands would be silly, when the courts will save me all the risk. And while I hate to disappoint poor little Bertha, who believes I'm down here to carry her off, in spite of old Reuben, she'll understand, and be willing to wait a bit. Thank you over and over again, Thad.

I'm feeling a thousand per cent better, suh, after what you said."

"And about the other thing, Bob, I wouldn't let myself believe too strongly that this mysterious prisoner of the moonshiners will turn out to be your father. There were some other revenue men who have disappeared in the last few years, men who started into the mountains to learn things, and never came out again. It might be one of these after all. And I guess you'd be awfully disappointed if you set too much store on that thing."

"I keep trying all I know how not to hope *too* much, Thad," replied the other, with a big sigh; "and tellin' myself that it would be too great news; yet, seems like there was a little bird nestlin' away down in here, that goes on singin' all the while, singin' like a mockingbird that brings good news," and Bob laid a trembling hand on his breast in the region of his heart, as he spoke.

"Well, said Thad, warmly, "I'm just hoping that everything'll come out the way you want, old fellow. We're going to back you up the best we know how; and if we fail to do what we aim for, it won't be from lack of trying."

"I know that, and I'll never, never forget it as long as I live!" declared the other, almost choking in his emotion.

"There's the camp," remarked Thad, five minutes later," and everything seems to be going along all

right at the old stand. I can see Step Hen lying on his back, with his hat over his eyes as if he might be taking a nap; Smithy is of course brushing his coat, because he has discovered some specks of dust on it that worry him; and if you look at Giraffe, you'll know what he's up to when I tell you he's whittling at a piece of pine, to beat the band."

"Getting kindling ready to start up the fire, when supper time comes around," said Bob, with a chuckle, as though some of these familiar sights began to do him good, in that they served to take his thoughts away from the things that distressed and worried him.

When the two scouts arrived in camp they were immediately surrounded by their comrades, who demanded to know what they had seen and done. To judge from the variety of questions that showered upon them, one might think that Thad and Bob had been off on a regular foraging expedition, and scouring the upper regions in search of adventures.

And indeed, they did have something to tell that made the others stare. The several little holes in their clothes, evidently made by sharp claws, gave evidence as to the truth of their wonderful story. And all of the stay-at-homes united in the fervent hope that Polly Dady might be grateful enough to bring Bob the news he yearned to possess.

Several of the boys had been dispatched to the cabins across the valley, where they managed to pur-

chase some dozens of eggs, but could get no bacon. They did secure a couple of fowls, however, which were even then plucked, and ready for the pot.

As evening settled down soon afterward, the scouts prepared to make themselves as comfortable as the circumstances allowed.

And certainly not one among them so much as dreamed that other peculiar events were on the calendar; ready to take their places upon the stage; and advance the interests of the fellow scout, whose yearning to look again on the familiar scenes of his younger years had influenced the others to hike through the Blue Ridge Range.

CHAPTER XX.

THE AWAKENING OF STEP HEN.

"SAY fellers, did anybody see that——"

Step Hen had just managed to get that far in what he was about to say, when he was rudely interrupted by a combined shout from Giraffe, Davy Jones, and Bumpus.

"Don't you dare accuse us of taking any of your old traps, Step Hen!" said the last named scout, severely.

"We're sure gettin' awful tired of that war cry,"

declared Giraffe. "It's always this thing or that he's lost, and never by his own fault at all. A sly little jinx is hoverin' around, ready to grab up a thing just as soon as Step, lays it down. Still, I notice that every single time, it turns out he put it there himself. Get a new tune for a change, Step Hen, and ring it on us."

"By the way," remarked Smithy, who was very polite, and never joined in the loud and boisterous jeers that greeted some break on the part of a comrade; "what fresh misfortune has overtaken you now, Step Hen?"

"Oh!" replied the other, with a broad grin, "when our funny friends broke in on me that way, I was only going to ask if any of you wide-awake scouts had noticed that I had my badge turned right-side up, early this morning?"

There was a general laugh at this, even the three culprits joining in.

Among all Boy Scouts, it has become the proper wrinkle to turn the badge upside down to start the day; and the wearer has no right to change its position until he has done an actual good deed toward some one else; or even helped an animal that was in distress. Many are the expedients resorted to, in order to gain this privilege; for it is deemed in bad taste to spend the entire day with the badge reversed on the lapel of the coat.

A thousand ways can be found whereby the boy

may feel that he has a right to alter the position of his badge, and prove that he had done something of a kindly nature, that is a credit to his character. An old woman may be helped across the street; a heavy basket carried for a child; a box that is trying the strength of a single man may be made easier to lift into a wagon by a pair of sturdy, willing hands; the harness that is galling the shoulder of a horse can be rendered less troublesome if a rag is doubled up, and fastened to the leather—well, the list of things that wide-awake scouts find in order to gain this privilege would really seem to be without end.

So all the others now turned toward Step Hen, with curiosity expressed on their faces; for they seemed to guess that it could be no ordinary explanation that he meant to give them.

"What wonderful stunt did you manage to carry through so early in the day, down in this forsaken country?" demanded Giraffe.

Bumpus looked forlornly at his own badge, that still hung to his coat lapel in its reversed position; showing that he, at least, had not been able to discover any means of doing a good turn to some object, however humble; in fact, he had, like most of the other boys, entirely forgotten about the usual programme. There were no old ladies to help down here; no errands to run for mother; no problems to solve for little brother; nothing but the everlast-

ing mountains rising grimly all about them, and silence lying on the scene like a great blanket.

"I reckon I'm the only one in the bunch that's been smart enough to get his badge turned to-day," chuckled Step Hen, proudly exhibiting the article in question; "and I'd just like the fun of hearing all of you try and guess how I managed it; but then, I know you'd never hit on the truth in a thousand years; and so I s'pose I'll have to up and tell you."

"Oh! wake me up, somebody, when he gets really started," groaned Giraffe; "of all the slow-pokes, Step Hen takes the cake."

"I'll tell you," began the other, with a sly look toward the speaker, as though he purposely delayed his disclosure in order to annoy the impatient Giraffe; "you see, it was this way, fellows. I happened to be walking out along the back road just after we'd done breakfast. Thought I'd dropped my handkerchief somewhere, but afterwards I found it inside my hat, you know."

"Sure, it's always that way," muttered Giraffe, who lay with his eyes closed, but drinking in all that was said.

"Well," continued Step Hen, "all at once I noticed something that interested me a whole lot. There was one of them queer little tumble-bugs you always see ashovin' round balls along the road, an' goin' somewhere that nobody ever yet found out. This critter was tryin' like all possessed to push his

ball up a steep little place in the road. Sometimes he'd get her close to the top, and then lose his grip; when it'd roll all the way back again.

"Say, boys, that insect's pluck interested me a heap, now, I'm tellin' you. Right there I got one of the best lessons a scout ever picked up in all his life; which was the old story, 'if at first you don't succeed, try, try again.' And he kept on tryin' again and again. I must a stayed there all of half an hour, just watchin' that game little critter pushin' his ball up against the hardest luck ever. And then, when I just couldn't stand it any longer I took bug and ball in my hand, and put 'em both up on top of that rise. And after that I thought I had a right to turn my badge right-side up!"

The scouts looked at each other. Somehow, they did not laugh, though surely it must have been one of the queerest reasons ever advanced by a fellow-scout, as an excuse for wearing his badge honorably.

Despite its grotesque nature, there was also something rather pathetic about the thought of Step Hen, only a careless, half-grown lad at best, spending a whole lot of time, simply watching an humble but game little beetle trying to fight against hard luck, and almost as interested in the outcome as the wretched bug itself.

"How about that, Mr. Scoutmaster; is Step entitled to wear his badge that way, on account of helping that silly little bug climb his mountain?"

asked Davy, turning to Thad; but though his words might seem to indicate a touch of scorn, there was certainly nothing of the sort in his manner.

Thad himself had been amused, and deeply interested, in Step Hen's recital. Only too well did he know what a careless and indifferent fellow the boy had ordinarily been classed, both at school and at home. Seldom, if ever, had he paid the least attention to things that were happening all around him, and which might appeal to the sympathies of boys who were made of finer grain than Step Hen.

And now, it seemed that something had been making an insidious change inside the scout; when he could feel such intense interest in so trivial a thing as the pluck of an obscure tumble-bug. Time was when Step Hen would have cared little whether or not he came down with his heel upon such an object, which ought to know better than get in his path.

It was different now, since Step Hen had joined the scouts. His eyes had been opened to many things, the existence of which he had never dreamed in those other days. And he could never again be the same indifferent fellow; he must go on advancing along the trail that led to a better knowledge of Nature's great secrets; and above all else, the capacity that lay within his own heart for understanding these myriads of small but wonderful things.

"I'm not going to answer that question myself,

Davy," said Thad, with a smile. "Fact is, I'd much rather have the candid opinion of every scout on the subject. So I'm going to put it to a vote, here and now; and I want you to be serious about it, small matter though it may seem; for upon such things rests the very foundations of the whole Boy Scout movement—observing, understanding, appreciating."

"Whew!" muttered Giraffe, "and all this fuss about one little tumble-bug!"

"Those who really and truly think Step Hen had a full right to turn his badge right side up for the interest he took in that game little creature's struggle to overcome what seemed unsurmountable difficulties, and for lending a helping hand in the end, raise the right hand," and Thad put his up for a starter.

Not counting Step Hen himself, there were just seven fellows present when Thad asked them to show their colors. And including the scoutmaster himself, just seven instantly raised a hand.

Thad laughed softly. It gave him more pleasure than he could tell to see that the boys understood the motive that had swayed their comrade. And doubtless this vote of confidence would urge Step Hen to go along the path he had discovered, with ever-increasing confidence, as its charms continued to be revealed in ever-increasing proportions day by day. A new world would soon open up to his inquiring

eyes. He would find ten thousand things of tremendous interest all around him, to which he had up to now been as blind as a bat. Never again would he feel alone, even though no comrade were at his side; for he could discover innumerable objects about him at any time, calculated to chain his attention.

"Seems to be unanimous, fellows," remarked Thad; "and I hereby publicly commend our comrade, Step Hen, for his action of this morning. Yes, he did have a right to turn his badge. It was not so much *what* he did, as the feeling he showed in, first of all, stopping to watch the bug; second, getting tremendously interested in its never-give-up spirit; third, in applying the principal to himself; and last but not least, his desire to lend a helping hand. For Step Hen, boys, this has been a day that some time later on in life, he will mark with a white stone; for he has begun to notice things. And with the fever on him, he'll have to keep on noticing, until he'll think it's not the same old world at all but one filled at every turn with splendid discoveries. I know, because I've been through the same thing myself."

"Hurrah!" said Giraffe, who had been considerably impressed by what the scoutmaster had said. "What did I tell you, fellows, about not missing Dr. Philander Hobbs, our regular scoutmaster, on this hike? D'ye think now, he could have said all

that one-half as good as Thad did? I guess not. And Step Hen, I'm ashamed to say that the whole blessed day has gone by without my ever thinking to do something good for another feller, so I could turn my badge over. There she rests; and I give you all fair notice that to-morrow I'm going to start in right away to get it moving."

"Plenty of time to-night yet, Giraffe," piped up Davy. "I happen to know a fellow who thinks a certain knife you own would look mighty fine in his pocket, if only you'd take the trade he offers. Now, if you made him happy, p'raps you'd have the right to turn your badge; and he c'd do ditto, making it a killing of two birds with one stone. Better think it over, Giraffe."

The tall boy looked at Davy with a frown, and shook his head.

"'Tain't fair to put it up to me that way, Davy," he declared, obstinately. "You just know I don't want to trade, the least bit. Now, if you'd say, that on the whole you'd concluded to quit botherin' me, that would be a good deed, and I reckon you'd ought to have the right to turn your badge."

At this ingenious return thrust Davy subsided, with a grin, and a general laugh arose from the other scouts.

But if most of the boys were merry, there was one who looked sober enough. Of course this was Bob Quail. He knew what a tremendous undertaking

he had before him, and the results seemed so uncertain that it was only natural he should feel the heavy weight resting upon his young shoulders.

First of all, he must meet his cousin, Bertha, and learn what success had followed her efforts to discover whether the paper she had seen by accident in her guardian's safe was the missing document which Bob believed Reuben had abstracted, placing another in its place. Then, later on, he had that appointment with Polly, the moonshiner's daughter, who was to bring him news concerning the mysterious prisoner.

Yes, Bob certainly had quite enough on his young mind to make him anything but jovial. Still, he had been more or less interested in what was going on around him, for he was, after all, a boy.

They were eating supper, as they chatted in this way. Night had settled down on the scene. It promised to be a pretty dark night at that, Thad realized, as he looked around him, and then up at the heavens, where a few stars held forth, but gave very little light.

It was fortunate that Bob happened to be so well acquainted around that vicinity otherwise he would never have been able to cross to the other side of the strange little basin which they called a valley, without carrying a lantern; and this in itself must be out of the question, since its light would betray him.

While they were eating, they heard a gunshot not far away.

"Wow! what d'ye think that means?" exclaimed Giraffe, jumping to his feet, and looking off in the gloom toward the back trail. "Seemed to me like it came from down that way, eh, boys."

"It sure did," announced Davy Jones, positively.

"And it was a gun in the bargain, with a big load. What d'ye s'pose they could find to shoot at in the dark?" demanded Step Hen.

"Oh! lots of things," replied Allan. "If a bob-cat jumped in on us right now, we'd think of using our gun, wouldn't we? But it might be that shot was some sort of signal, after all."

"There wasn't any answer, that's sure," interposed Bumpus.

"But seems to me I can hear somebody talking pretty loud that way," observed the listening Thad.

"I did too," declared Smithy; "but it's died away now, as though the excitement might be over. I wonder what it was, fellows?"

"Chances are, we'll never know," returned Giraffe, settling back once more to continue eating, for he was not yet through.

"Lots of queer things are happening all around us, that we'll never know," remarked Step Hen, seriously.

Thad looked at him curiously. This was a strange remark to come from the happy-go-lucky Step Hen.

It looked as though his one little experience of that morning had indeed done wonders toward causing the careless lad to turn over a new leaf. He was beginning to *think*, and see what a great big world this is after all. His horizon had been moved back hugely since he first yawned, and stretched, that same morning.

And the queer part of it was that no one thought to joke the boy about his altered disposition. They seemed to understand that it was no joking matter. Doubtless Step Hen's reformation would not be accomplished in a day, nor a week, nor even a month; but he had taken the first step, and from now on must begin to arouse himself to making a good use of the faculties with which a kindly Nature had endowed him.

"Listen!" exclaimed Thad, a little while later, just as they were about done supper.

"I heard somebody talking, too!" declared Davy Jones; while Allan showed by his manner that the sounds had surely come to his acute hearing, trained by long service in the piney woods of his native state.

"They're comin' this way, too; I c'n hear 'em pushin' through the bushes, and stumblin' along too." Bumpus declared, in an awed tone; looking a trifle worried, and wishing Thad would only snatch up that gun, lying against the tree trunk, which the other did not seem at all anxious to do.

The voices drew steadily nearer, as the boys stood and listened.

"Hyar's a fire, Nate; we gut ter git him thar, sure's anything. I tell yuh he'll never be able tuh walk 'crost tuh the doc's cabin. He'll bleed tuh death long 'foah we gits thar with 'im. Steady now, Cliff; hyah's a light, an' we kin see how bad yuh is hurt!"

Then, while the scouts stood and stared in amazement, a group of three men staggered into view, two of them assisting the third, whose faltering steps showed that he must have been injured, even if the arm that dangled helplessly at his side had not told the tale of a serious gunshot wound!

No wonder that the Boy Scouts felt a thrill as they watched these rough mountaineers enter their camp in this strange way.

CHAPTER XXI.

"BE PREPARED!"

"WHEE!"

It was Bumpus who gave utterance to this exclamation, though possibly he hardly realized, himself, that he was saying anything, as he stood there, and gaped at the sight of the wounded mountaineer being helped along into their camp.

But if Bumpus, and some of the others, were spell-bound by what they saw, gazing as though fascinated at the blood dripping from the man's fingers, Thad Brewster was not included in this group.

He had long ago picked up a smattering of knowledge connected with a surgeon's duties; and ever since taking up the new life of a Boy Scout, those things which concerned the saving of human life had somehow appealed to young Thad with redoubled force.

More than once now had he been called upon to show what he knew along these lines. A boy had been severely cut by an ax he was carelessly wielding in camp; and might have bled to death only for the energetic actions of Thad, who knew just how to secure a stout bandanna handkerchief around above the wound, with the knot pressing on the artery; and making a tournaquet by passing a stick through the folds of the rude bandage, twist until the bleeding was temporarily stopped, and the boy could be taken to a doctor.

Another time it had been a case of near drowning, when Thad, who had learned his lesson well, succeeded in exercising the lad's arms, after laying him on his chest and pressing his knee upon him, until he had started the lungs to working. In that case every one of the other scouts declared that only for

these prompt applications of scout knowledge the unfortunate one would surely have died.

And so, when he saw that the man who was being thus supported into their camp had been shot in the arm, and was in danger of bleeding to death, the surgeon instinct in Thad Brewster came immediately to the surface.

He never once thought about the fact that the man was very probably one of those very lawless moonshiners, whose presence all around had virtually marooned himself and chums in the heart of the mountains. He was a man, and in trouble; and perhaps Thad could be of some help!

And so the generous-hearted boy sprang forward, eager to lend a hand.

"Bring him right up to the fire, men!" he exclaimed. "What happened to him? Was he shot? We heard a gun go off a little while ago, and wondered what it meant."

The two men urged their injured companion forward. He seemed to have little mind of his own in the matter; though Thad could see that he had his jaws set, and was apparently determined to betray no sign of weakness in this terrible hour. The customary grit of the North Carolina mountaineer was there, without fail. It showed in the clenched hand, the grim look on his weather-beaten face, as well as in those tightly closed teeth.

"Yep, 'twar an accident," almost fiercely replied one of the men, whom Thad now recognized as the fellow whom they had met driving the vehicle that Bob declared had kegs of the illicit mountain dew hidden under the straw—Nate Busby. "We was walkin' thro' ther woods w'en a twig cort the trigger o' my gun, and she hit Cliff in the arm, makin' a bad hurt. Reckons as how he never kin hold out till we-uns git him acrost ter ther doc's cabin."

"You could, if we managed to stop that bleeding," said Thad, eagerly. "Bring him over here, and let me take a look, men. I've done a little something that way. And perhaps you don't know it; but all Boy Scouts are taught how to shut off the flow of blood. There, set him down, and help me get his coat off. There's no time to lose."

"Nope, thar's sure no time tuh lose," muttered the wretched Nate, who was undoubtedly feeling very keenly the fact that it had been *his* gun that had been discharged through accident, causing all this trouble; and that if the man died, his relatives might even want to hold the unlucky owner of that weapon to account for his carelessness, inexcusable in one who had been mountain born and bred.

They sat the wounded man down as gently as though he had been a babe; after which Nate assisted Thad to take the ragged coat off.

Some of the scouts crowded close, though with white faces; for the sight of blood is always enough

to send a cold chill to the hearts of those unaccustomed to the spectacle. But Allan was an exception; and strangely enough, there was Smithy, whom no one would ever have expected to show the least bit of nerve, evidently ready to lend the amateur surgeon a helping hand, if he called for recruits. It often takes a sudden emergency call like this to show what is under the veneered surface of a boy. Smithy had always been deemed rather effeminate; yet here he could stand a sight that sent the cold shivers chasing up and down the spines of such fellows as Giraffe, Davy Jones, and Step Hen, and almost completely upset poor Bumpus.

"Get me one of those stout bandages I brought along, Allan, please," said Thad, when he could see what the terrible nature of the wound was; "you know where they are. And Smithy, will you hand me that stick yonder?"

In a brief space of time the several articles were at the service of the boy, who first of all made a good-sized knot in the handkerchief, after wrapping it around the man's arm *above* the wound; and then, inserting the stout stick, he began twisting the same vigorously.

It must have pained tremendously, but not a whimper, not a semblance of a groan did they hear from the bearded lips of the wounded mountaineer. Indeed, he seemed to arouse himself sufficiently to watch the confident operations of the young surgeon

with a rising curiosity; and Thad thought he could detect a slight smile on his dark face.

As for Nate and the other rough man, they stared as though unable to believe their eyes, to thus see a mere boy so wonderfully able to do what was necessary in a case of life and death. Every little movement did they follow with wrapt attention. No doubt, a great relief had already commenced to rise up in the heart of Nate, as hope again took hold upon him. If the other survived the shock, and loss of blood, it would not be so bad; and trouble might not come home to him on account of his liability for the accident.

Thad soon knew that he had done the right thing. The knot had been properly placed, so that the pressure upon the artery above the wound prevented any more blood being pumped that way by the excited action of the man's heart.

"There," he remarked, in a satisfied way, "I guess we've got the bleeding held up, and you can get him to a doctor, if, as you say, there is one across the valley. I'm going to bind this stick so it can't come loose while you're helping him along. But if it should, perhaps you've seen how I did the job, and you could fix it up again?"

"Sure," replied Nate; "and yuh dun it ther neatest I ever knowed, younker. Reckon as how Cliff Dorie an' me has reason tuh be glad yuh happened tuh be so clost. If so be he lives thru hit, as he will

now, dead sartin, he's gwine tuh owe his life tuh yer."

Thad happened to catch a glimpse of Bob's face just then, as the other turned toward him; for up to now he had been keeping rather aloof, not wishing to be noticed by either of the mountain men. He was surprised to see the expression of suddenly renewed hope that seemed to have taken up its abiding place there. Apparently the Southern boy had made a pleasing discovery, which of course Thad could only guess at, until he had found a chance to speak to his comrade. But he understood readily enough that it must concern the coming of the three men, and the fact of the scouts being enabled to place them under obligations.

With the flow of blood stopped, the wounded man seemed to gather new energy. He no doubt felt that he had at least a fair chance to pull through. He started to get on his feet, seeing which Thad immediately offered his hand to help him; and the mountaineer's 'horny palm was confidently thrust into his much smaller one; as though, after what miracle he had already seen the lad perform, the man were willing to trust him in anything.

Yes. Fortune had again been kind to the scouts; only in this instance it had not been a case of searching for chances to do good; the opportunity had come knocking at their very door, so that all that was necessary was for them to *be prepared,* just as

the scout's motto signifies, and then do the best they knew how.

Again did the two men take hold of their stricken companion. Before they quit the vicinity of the fire, however, the man named Nate Busby turned and shook hands all around. Evidently he was grateful for the assistance rendered. To his mind this first aid to the injured meant a whole lot; and while he did not say a single word, his action was enough to show what he thought.

Then the group departed, heading toward the other side of the valley, where, in one of the humble cabins, some sort of mountain doctor was to be found, rude in his way, no doubt, but perfectly capable of attending to a gunshot wound; for these doubtless constituted the bulk of calls that were made upon his services.

When they had gone the scouts began to discuss the queer happening, and compare notes as to which one of them had shown the least alarm.

Bob Quail came directly over to where Allan and Thad were standing, just as the latter had expected he would do. That expression of eager anticipation still shone upon his dark face, and his eyes fairly glowed with satisfaction.

"Well, will wonders ever stop happening?" he said, as he reached the others. Did you hear what Nate called the wounded man, Thad, Allan?"

"Yes, it was Cliff Dorie. And I guess you've

heard it before, judging from the way you act?" observed the scoutmaster.

"Talk about luck, why, we're just swimming neck deep in it, suh!" the other continued. "I thought he looked a little like somebody I'd known befoah; and when I heard that name, I knew it; Why, Cliff Dorie is the brother of Old Phin's wife!"

"Fine!" exclaimed Allan, with a broad smile.

"I should say, yes," Bob went on, eagerly; "seems as though we were just bound to put the whole Dady family in our debt. There was Old Phin himself, who felt so interested in all you told him about the Boy Scout movement; then there was Polly, who might have had her face badly scratched, not to mention other wounds, if we hadn't just happened to get there in time to chase that savage mother bobcat off. And now you've gone and saved the life of Polly's own uncle. Oh! p'raps, suh, we won't have to get into any fuss at all about that prisoner of the Still; p'raps Old Phin might feel that we'd done his family enough good to change his mind about keepin' that revenue man up there any longer, aworkin' his life out; and let him go away with us, if he promised never to tell anything he'd learned. And let me say to you both, I'm feelin' somethin' right here, inside, that seems to tell me it's going to be all right, all right!" and Bob repeated those last two words softly, caressingly, as though they meant everything in the wide world to him.

CHAPTER XXII.

WHEN BOB CAME BACK.

THE other boys of course shared in Bob's deep feeling of satisfaction. Perhaps he might be expecting too much from the old mountaineer; but then, Bob had lived among these people during a good portion of his life, and ought to be able to judge as to the amount of gratitude they were capable of feeling.

"But you ought to be off across the valley yourself, Bob," ventured Thad, presently.

"I know it, suh," the Southern lad replied, quickly; "and let me tell you I'm starting right now in better spirits than I ever dreamed would be the case. I want to get back heah in good time, so as to go up yondah with you, and meet Polly."

"If you're not too much played out," suggested Allan.

Bob drew his figure up proudly, as he went on to say:

"I'd have to be mighty nigh a collapse, suh, let me tell you, to keep from goin' to where I've got a chance to hear about *him!*" and they did not need to be told who was meant, for they knew Bob was

thinking of his missing father, whom everybody had long believed to be surely dead.

And so he presently vanished, with a farewell wave of the hand.

The other scouts gathered around the fire, chatting on various subjects, but principally in connection with the recent happening. They thought it the strangest thing in the world how two girls came to play a part in the affair which their good comrade, Bob Quail, was trying to put through; and of such vastly different types too, the one a plain mountain maid, and the other, according to what they themselves had seen, quite a dainty little thing, cultured and refined.

"Smithy, I'm going too tell you to reverse that badge of yours," said the scoutmaster, as they sat there around the fire, waiting for the return of the absent comrade.

Smithy looked up in surprise. He had been smoothing his coat sleeve after a peculiar habit he had, as though he imagined he had discovered some dust there. And for the moment he fancied that Thad must be joking him on account of those "finicky" ways, as Giraffe called them, which he could not wholly throw aside, since extreme neatness had long ago become a part of his very nature.

"That's very kind of you, Thad," he remarked, trying to appear calm; "and I'm sure I feel grateful for the privilege, which should always be a matter of

pride I take it, with every Boy Scout. But I am not aware, sir, just how I've gained the right to reverse my badge."

"By handing me that stick when I asked for it, and thereby becoming a partner with me in assisting that wounded man. You notice that I'm turning my own badge, because I think I've earned it by this act, if I didn't by what Bob and myself did to that bobcat. And Allan, you're in this deal also: you brought me that roll of stout muslin when I wanted it, so you did all you could."

"And I helped get him on his feet!" declared Giraffe, quickly.

"So did I!" exclaimed Bumpus, excitedly; "anyhow, I started to lend a hand; but there was so many around I just got crowded out. But I *wanted* to do something, sure I did, Thad!"

"Turn your badge, then," ordered the scoutmaster, smiling. "In fact, every scout was full of sympathy, and ready to assist if called on. And under the circumstances, I just guess there needn't be any badge in this camp unturned right now. To-morrow we'll start fresh again, and let's see how quick all of us can follow after Step Hen's example, and help some worthy object along."

"Even if it is only a poor little tumble-bug that can't push his ball home," remarked Giraffe, with a grin.

The time hung heavily upon their hands. No doubt this was partly caused by their intense eagerness to learn just how Bob was coming out. Would Bertha meet him; or might she have been shut up in the house by her guardian, stern Reuben Sparks? If she did come, would she bring that paper which she said was signed with her dead father's name; and supposing it proved to be all Bob hoped and prayed it would, was it possible, if placed in the hands of a competent lawyer in Asheville, that this document would take Bertha from the custody of Reuben, and give her a home with Bob's mother up in Cranford?

All these things were debated from every standpoint; and wide-awake boys can see the weak links in the chain about as quickly as any one; so that Thad was kept busy explaining, and building up plans to suit the altered conditions.

"Ought to be time he was here," Giraffe remarked, as he stifled a huge yawn.

"It's sure nearly a whole hour since we heard that row across there," Bumpus went on to say. "Seemed like a whole crowd had started to yell, and dogs to bark. We none of us could make up our minds what it meant. Some thought the wounded man must a got to the cabins, an' all that noise meant the kind of reception a brave feller gets in these parts when he's brought home on a shutter. But others, they seemed to b'lieve it might have had to

do with our chum Bob, and that p'raps he'd been surrounded, and trapped by the wise old Reuben."

"We hope not, for a fact," declared Thad.

"Well, there's somebody coming right now, I give you my word!" observed Smithy, who happened to be on the windward side of the fire, and able to hear better than some of the rest.

"And from the right direction, too," added Allen.

The patter of footsteps came closer, and presently a dim figure loomed up, almost staggering.

"It's Bob, all right!" cried Bumpus; and Thad heaved a sigh of relief, for he had begun to fear that something might have happened to disturb the carefully laid plans of his companion.

The Southern boy came into camp, breathing heavily. He seemed to be very much exhausted, but Thad could detect a look of triumph on his face that seemed to tell of something worth while having been accomplished.

Dropping down, Bob motioned for a drink of water, and Step Hen made haste to get him one from the collapsible bucket they had brought along with them. Draining the tin cup, Bob sighed as though the cooling liquid went just to the right spot, and had refreshed him wonderfully.

"It's all right, Thad!" he managed to say, noticing the questioning look that the other was bending upon him.

"Then you saw your cousin, and got the paper?"

asked the scoutmaster, eagerly, while the rest of the boys fairly hung upon every word.

Bob nodded his head.

"Get my breath right soon now," he remarked; "then tell you all about it. Phew! I had a smart run, believe me!"

The boys exchanged expressive looks. They drew their own conclusions from the little Bob had already dropped; and began to believe that he must have been hotly pursued. Evidently then, if this were indeed the case, Bob had met with an adventure since leaving the camp-fire, and a serious one at that.

It is always a difficult thing for the ordinary boy to restrain his impatience, and several of the scouts squirmed about uneasily while Bob was trying to calm himself down, so that he might talk with reasonable comfort.

Thad let him have his own time. He understood that Bob was even more anxious to tell, than any of them were to hear; and that just as quickly as he could, he was sure to start in.

That time came presently, when his heart began to beat less violently; and as a consequence Bob started to breathe more naturally.

"I met Bertha," he began to say, "and she gave me the paper. Boys, it's everything I hoped it'd be; and once I manage to get it in the hands of a good

lawyer, good-bye to Mr. Reuben Sparks' authority over little Bertha, and her fortune."

"Wow! that's going some!" burst out Giraffe, rubbing his thin hands one over the other, as though decidedly pleased by the news.

"Was she disappointed when you told her how impossible it would be for us to take her away right now, when these moonshiners have got us marooned up here in their blessed old mountains; and we can't turn whichever way without runnin' slap up against a sentry with his old gun?" asked Bumpus.

"That's right, she *was* upset when I told her that same," answered the other. "It made me feel right bad too, suh, to see how she took it; and I tell you right now I came mighty neah givin' in, and sayin' we'd make a try. But I remembered what Thad heah had told me, and how it was best for all of us that we let the courts summon old Reuben to bring Bertha before the bar of justice. An' finally, after I'd explained it all to her, she began to see it the same way. My cousin has got the spirit of the Quails all right, I tell you, fellows, even if she is young and little.

"I reckon you stayed so long tryin' to convince her, Bob, that you clean forgot how you'd promised to get back here as soon as you could?" remarked Step Hen, under the belief, no doubt, that he was giving the other a sly dig.

"Well, perhaps you are correct about that same,

suh," replied Bob, quite unabashed; "she was like most girls, and had to be argued into seeing things like boys see 'em. Of course, I couldn't break away till she had arranged to go back to the house, and wait for things to begin to move, as they surely would, just as soon as I get to Asheville. But there was one real smart thing she did do, and I've just got to tell you about that befo' I come to my own adventure."

"That's right, don't skip anything, old chum," remarked Giraffe, warmly, as he settled down to listen.

"When Bertha took that document from the little pigeonhole in the safe where he had it hidden, she thought to make up another as much like it as she could, and put that in place of the one she carried off. Some of you scouts ought to take pattern from the smartness of that little girl; don't you think so, Thad?" and Bob turned his now smiling face upon the patrol leader.

"They couldn't improve very much on that sort of work," Thad declared; "and if girls were allowed to join our troop I'd vote every time to let your cousin come in. I'm sure she'd be an honor to any organization."

"Now tell us what happened to you, Bob!" asked Bumpus.

"Well," continued the other, drawing a long breath as though what he was about to say stirred

him once more; "I was just ready to say good-bye, when we heard loud voices, together with the barking of a big dog, and Old Reuben, with a man, and a mastiff about hip-high burst into view, both men carrying lanterns, and heavy sticks in their hands And you can believe me, fellows, I understood that I was in for a little excitement about that time!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

A CLIMB IN THE DARK.

"THAT'S where you had ought to have had our gun, Bob," remarked Giraffe, as the other paused for a moment, to recover his breath before going on with his exacting recital.

"I was about of that opinion myself, suh," the other continued; "and I reckon that if such had been the case, there would have been one less mastiff in the world right now. But after all, it's well I didn't take the weapon. Things would have gone different from what they did; and I have no fault to find, suh, not a bit."

"But what did you do; don't tell us you beat a big dog runnin'?" demanded Bumpus, incredulously.

"I am not so foolish as to want you to believe that

sort of stuff, suh," replied the Southern boy, stiffly. "I doubt very much if there is a man living, even the winner of the great world Marathon, who could have outrun that hound. Fortunately I didn't have to depend on my heels altogether, to escape being bitten by his fangs. There chanced to be another way out of the hole."

"Say, I guess *she* had a hand in it!" suggested Giraffe.

"Go up to the head, suh," remarked Bob, with a smile; "because that is just what did come about. Old Reuben, he must have managed to catch sight of some one, even if he wasn't nigh enough to tell that I was dressed in the uniform of a scout. He up and sicked the dog on me; and I reckon it wouldn't have mattered one bit to that cold-blooded old man if the ugly beast had torn me badly."

"And was you arunnin' like fun all the while?" asked Step Hen.

"I believe I was making pretty fast time, suh, considerin' that the bushes in the garden interfered with my sprinting. But that dog would have caught up with me befo' I ever could have climbed the high fence, only for a thing that happened. First thing I knew I heard Bertha calling at the top of her little voice to the mastiff. And I reckon now that Ajax, he must have been more used to mindin' the crook of her little finger than he was the orders of Old Reuben. Fo', believe me, suh, he just gave over chasin'

after me, and went, and began to fawnin' on her hand."

"Great stuff!" declared Bumpus. "Say, I c'n just think I see that Old Rube prancin' around there, orderin' Ajex on to grab you, an' gettin' madder'n madder when the wise dog just utterly declined to obey. I always heard that the sun c'd force a feller to take his coat off, when the wind made a dead fizzle out of the job. Kindness goes further with some animals than fear does."

"Hear! hear! words of wisdom dropping like pearls of great price from the lips of our comrade, Bumpus!" cried Giraffe.

"But they're true, every word, all right," affirmed the stout scout, firmly.

"I kept on running for two reasons," Bob went on to explain. "In the first place, I didn't know but what the dog might be forced to alter his ways, and start out after me. Then again, p'raps that man with Old Reuben might be coming, licketty-split after me; and I want you to believe I didn't mean to be caught, with that valuable paper in my pocket at that."

"So you made pretty warm time of it over here, eh?" remarked Davy Jones, who had remained quiet for some time, being deeply impressed by this story which the other was giving them.

"I never let up for two minutes at a time all the way across," admitted Bob, in a satisfied tone. "Of

course I had a few tumbles, but I reckon there was none of 'em serious; leastways I didn't get bruised, or tear my clothes. And now that I've got my breath back again, it's time we thought of starting out; because there's heaps mo' that's got to be done before we c'n call a rest."

"Yes, a great deal," admitted Thad, who, however, was well pleased with the outcome thus far; "and after you've lain here about ten minutes or so, Bob, we'll see whether you feel able to take that other climb. If you don't why, Allan here could go in your place."

"And do just as well, I have no doubt, suh," added Bob; "but thank you, I shall surely be able to take my part in that climb. If you gave the word right now you'd see me spring to my feet, and start; because there's every reason in the world to spur me on. Who wouldn't make an extra effort for that?"

The hour had grown late, since they had waited much beyond the appointed time for the return of the messenger who had gone to meet Bertha. But Thad knew they still had an abundance of time to get to the place arranged with Polly, before midnight, which had been the hour set for their meeting.

"Now, if you feel refreshed, we'll make a start, Bob," remarked the scoutmaster, after a bit.

The other was on his feet instantly, and he gave not the slightest sign of weariness at that.

"Let me have just one more cup of that fine water," he remarked, "and then I'm in fine fettle for business. If this second job only turns out as handsome as that other, this'll sure be the happiest night ever. But I hope that Reuben does not lay his hand on my cousin for what has happened this night. If he does, he'll suffer for it, as sure as my name's Bob Quail."

"You don't really think he'd go as far as to strike her, do you?" asked Thad, to whom the very idea seemed abhorrent.

"I don't just know how far a man of his stripe would go if made very furious, suh. To tell you the truth, I didn't want to run at all; but Bertha insisted on my doing the same. She said nothing was going to happen to injure her; and that if I was caught, with that paper in my possession, she never would have the least chance to get away. And that was all that made me run, believe me, suh."

Thad took his shotgun along with him; and noticing the queer look Giraffe gave him, he condescended to explain.

"Don't believe for a minute that I expect to make use of this on some moonshiner," he said, earnestly, yet with a trace of a smile lurking about the corners of his mouth. "The mission of Boy Scouts is more to bind up, than to give wounds; though they are allowed to do this other in extreme cases, where some person's life may be in danger. But you re-

member, we ran across a nasty bobcat up yonder once before; and if so be she happens to be laying for us, I'd like to be prepared for trouble. A scout should never go around with a chip on his shoulder looking for trouble; but if it finds him out, why, he's just *got* to defend himself. That's the way I look at it; and most others do too. Come on, Bob, if you're ready."

When the two boys quitted camp Bob was walking as sprucely as ever. If he still felt the effects of his long run he knew how to conceal the fact in the finest way—Giraffe, Bumpus, Step Hen, Smithy, and Davy Jones believed they had ever seen. Only Allan, being experienced in such things, could see that Bob was laboring under a heavy strain, and had his teeth tightly clenched; though the body might be weak, it was an indomitable spirit that urged him on.

Between them the two boys had noted things when coming down the mountain that afternoon, and in this way picked out the course they expected to take on that same night. It was rough enough, especially when they had to do their climbing in the dark; since carrying a lighted lantern would be foolhardy in the extreme.

Bob's impatience took him in the lead most of the time. Thad cautioned his impetuous companion in low whispers several times; and yet, knowing what the motive was that drew Bob along in such feverish

haste, he could hardly blame him. At the same time he knew the danger of making a false step when they happened to be close to the brink of some steep descent, down which a roll meant instant death, or at least broken bones.

As they climbed upwards they would pause every little while to get a new supply of energy, as well as recover their breath. And at such times both boys eagerly scanned the black gulf that lay below them.

It had not taken their keen eyes long to discover several lights that seemed to move in eccentric circles and other movements. Nor was either of them at a loss to understand what this implied.

"The moonshiner videttes are having another talk," Bob remarked, as they sat and watched several lights carrying on in this weird fashion.

"Seems like it," said Thad, thoughtfully.

"I wonder now, what is being carried along the lines? It'd be a great stunt, Thad, if we could read the signs, and listen to the talk, wouldn't it? P'raps now we'd learn something to our advantage," the Southern lad went on, longingly.

"Well, as we haven't got the code book," laughed the scoutmaster, "that would be a pretty hard job, I take it."

"But still," Bob continued, with a shade of entreaty in his voice that was hard to resist, "I take it that you could give a guess that would come pretty nigh the truth, if you cared to try, Thad."

"Well, I don't know about that," replied the other scout; and then adding, as he realized that Bob was grieved: "I'm willing enough to make a try, if you think it would pay. Let's see, first of all, where these fellows are located who are doing all this communicating."

"There's one on the side of the mountain over yonder," declared Bob; "then that's a second fellow across the valley; you can see his lantern or torch dipping every which way; now he's stopped, as if he'd been asking more questions. And Thad, seems to me, the one that's doing the heft of the jabbering is located down yonder. Like as not the information's coming from him."

"That's across the valley, Bob?" remarked Thad.

"You're correct, suh; somewhere neah the place from which I was chased away not more than two hours back. That's where the cabins lie."

"And that's where Nate and the other mountain man took Cliff Dorie," continued the scoutmaster. Now, you can put things together yourself, if only you think, Bob. Don't you see that Nate is probably telling these other fellows all about what happened to Cliff. And I certainly do hope he doesn't forget to give us our due in the matter, for it would go a great way toward making these rough men our friends. You know only too well what that would mean, Bob. Friends with Phin Dady just now might be the means of giving you back your father."

Bob sighed heavily as he started on again, urged by a desire to come upon Polly as soon as possible, and learn the truth, no matter whether the news proved a disappointment, or not.

But in his haste he forgot the caution Thad was trying always to instill in his mind; for stumbling presently, he found himself toppling over an unknown abyss that lay in the darkness, so that its extent could not be seen.

Thad had kept very close to his heels, and was prepared for something like this, so that he acted from impulse, there being not a second to give to thinking.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE CLOCK IN THE SKY.

"Oh! Thad!"

Bob unconsciously gave utterance to this low, bubbling cry as he felt the ground slipping from under him, and his eyes looking down into an inky void. Then something clutched hold of him, and his downward progress was stayed. Thad had shot out a hand, and grasped his chum by one of his legs, at the same time bracing himself for the shock.

This he did in the twinkling of an eye, dropping his gun, and with that hand laying hold of a sapling that, fortunately, chanced to be within easy reach.

"Careful, don't kick more than you can help, Bob," he remarked, as coolly as he possibly could, though a sensation akin to horror swept over him immediately he had acted. "I've got a good grip on you, and my other hand is holding on to a stout little sapling, so we just can't go down. Now work yourself back, inch by inch, as well as you can. Yo-heave-o! here you come! Another try, Bob! That gave us quite some distance. Ready to make it

again? Why, this is easy. Here you are now, altogether boys, with a will!"

And after half a dozen of these concerted pulls and backward movements, Bob found that he had reached a spot where he could take care of himself.

"Whew! that was what I call a close call!" he muttered. "I wonder, now, just how far down I'd have had to go, if you hadn't been clever enough to grab me just in time?"

"We're not going to bother our heads about that, Bob," replied the other, quickly; "only please go a bit slower. We won't make any time, if we have to stop, and go through that circus stunt every little while. And Bob, it might happen that I'd lose my grip, and either let you go down, or there'd be two of us take the drop. Does it pay to try and make speed at such a terrible risk?"

"You're right, just like you always are, Thad," replied the hasty and now penitent one; "and I'm sure a fool for taking chances that way. Here, you go up ahead, and set the pace. That's the only way we can fix it; because, like as not inside of five minutes I'd be rushing along again for all I'm worth."

"Perhaps that would be the best plan," Thad observed, with a chuckle. "I thought of it, but didn't want to make you feel that I distrusted your leadership. And I want to say right now that it isn't that makes me take the lead, only because you are so excited that you're not fit to judge things right."

"But don't let's waste any more precious time, Thad. Polly might have gotten to the place ahead of us, you know. Oh! wouldn't I be sore if she got tired of waiting, and went back home."

"All the same," Thad remarked, confidently, "I don't think Polly would ever do such a mean thing as that. She understands just how crazy you are to know, and she's right now putting herself in your place. No, Polly will wait up for us, make your mind easy on that, Bob. I wish I was as sure that we'd get there, safe and sound."

"Oh! I'm done with my capers, mind you, Thad," returned Bob, eagerly. "Since you've taken the lead, there's no chance for us to go pitching over a precipice. When they catch a weasel asleep, and no mortal man ever did that, I've heard, they'll hear of Thad Brewster making a fool move."

"It's nice of you to say that, anyway, Bob; I only wish I deserved the compliment you pay me. But we'd better talk less, and get on a little faster."

And after Thad had given this gentle little hint the conversation lagged; Bob realized that it was really no time to carry on any sort of talk; and that when they could not tell what dangers might be close around them in that inky darkness, they would be far wiser to keep a padlock on their lips.

Each time they stopped they again saw the signal lights flashing out here and there across the way, or below. They seemed like giant fireflies, striving to

free themselves from some invisible bonds. But the boys knew very well what it meant, and that the moonshiners of the Blue Ridge were holding an animated fire talk.

They met no animal on the way, which Thad thought was a piece of good luck. Even though he did carry his faithful little Marlin, which could send a powerful charge of shot a long distance; and close in, serve all the purposes of a big bore rifle, or musket, all the same, Thad was not desirous of meeting with any new and thrilling adventure.

Such things were all very nice after they had passed along, and one sat comfortably by a camp-fire, relating the circumstance; but while in process of action they were apt to bring a cold chill along in their train, not at all comfortable.

"It must be after the time we set, isn't it, Thad?" Bob finally asked, in a low voice, when they rested again.

The scoutmaster could not look at his little cheap but reliable watch without striking a match; and there was really no necessity for doing that. It made very little difference whether they were ahead, or somewhat behind the hour arranged for their meeting with Polly. And besides, there were other ways of telling time pretty accurately, without even having a watch along.

Thad glanced up into the heavens. He had often studied the bright worlds and suns to be seen there,

and knew considerable about the positions they occupied, changing, it might be, with the coming and going of the seasons.

"It's just close on to midnight, Bob," he observed, presently.

Of course Bob was at once interested.

"You're saying that because of the stars, Thad," he remarked. "Please tell me how you managed to tell."

"It's like this," the scoutmaster replied, not averse to pointing a lesson that might be seed sown in fertile ground; "notice those three rather small stars in the northeast, all in a line and pointing downward? Well, those are what they call the belt of Orion, the Hunter. They point nearly direct down to a mighty bright blue star that you see there, twinkling like everything."

"Yes, I've often noticed that, and I reckon it must be a planet near as big as Venus or Jupiter," remarked the other boy.

Thad laughed.

"Well," he remarked, "I guess now you'd think me crazy if I told you just how far that same star is away from us right now, ever so many times further than either of the planets you speak of. Why, Bob, that's Sirius, the Dog Star, said to be the biggest sun known to astronomers. Our little sun wouldn't make a spot beside that terrible monster;

which may be the central sun, around which all the other tens of thousands revolve everlastingly."

"Oh! yes, I've heard of the Dog Star, but never reckoned it amounted to anything in particular," declared the Southern lad, interested, in spite of the anxiety that was gnawing at his heart all the while; "but suppose you go on, suh, and explain to me how you can tell the time of night by consulting the Dog Star. You sure have got me to guessing."

"Nothing could be easier, if only you'd put your mind to it, and think, Bob?" continued the patrol leader. "These stars and planets rise at a certain hour every night. It grows later all the while, and many of them are not seen only half of the year, because they are above us in the daytime the rest of the twelve months. Now suppose you had watched that star, as I did last night, and knew just when it crept above that mountain ridge over yonder; you'd have a line on when it could be expected to come up to-night. Now do you see?"

"Well, it's as simple as two and two make four," replied Bob. "And so that's the way old hunters tell the time at night, do they? Reading the clock in the sky, you might call it, Thad. I'm sure going to remember all about that; and later on, when my mind's at rest, I'll ask you a heap more questions about these things. They get more and more interesting the deeper you dip in; ain't that so, Thad?"

"I've found it that way," replied the scout leader, quietly. "A fellow who keeps his eyes and ears open can almost hear the stars whispering together, they say; and as to the secrets the wind tells to the trees in passing, why that's easy to understand. But if you're rested by now, Bob, we'd better be on the move once more."

Only too willingly did Bob agree. He believed that they must by this time be very nearly up to the point where Polly had agreed to meet them. She had asked Bob if he remembered the place; and he in return had declared he could easily find it, even in the darkness of night; for often had he climbed the face of this ridge when he lived close by; for at the time, his father had owned the very place where Old Reuben Sparks now had his home, the miser having purchased it from Mrs. Quail upon her moving North with her son.

"Keep on the lookout for three oak trees growing close together, Thad," he said, presently. "It's always been a landmark around here, because any one can see it from the valley, you know. I reckon, now, we must be close by the same; and I'd hate to miss it in the dark. It's been some time since I was up here, and I'm apt to get mixed a bit."

"Well, I think you've done mighty well so far; because, unless my eyes deceive me, there's the place right ahead of us," Thad declared.

"You're right about that," Bob added, feverishly; "that's the place of the three mountain oaks; and they stand out against the sky, now we've changed our position. Oh! I'm beginning to shake all over, Thad, I'm that anxious. What if Polly shouldn't be on hand? Perhaps she just couldn't learn anything, after all, and will only come to tell me she did her best; but they keep the Still guarded too close, and she couldn't get close in. There's a dozen, yes, twenty things that might come up to upset my hopes. They don't seem so strong, Thad, now that we've got to the point."

"Well, I wouldn't let myself get in any sort of gloom about it yet, anyway, Bob. Time enough to cry after the milk is spilt. Here we are at the oaks, and we'll wait for Polly to come, if she's late; but I'm dead certain she'll keep her word with you. When a girl like Polly says she'll do a thing, you can just make up your mind she will, unless the heavens fall."

"That's right peart o' you, suh," said a soft voice close by; and they heard a rustling sound, as though some one might be coming out from amidst the dense foliage just beyond the three oaks. "Here's Polly, be'n awaitin' this half hour fur you-uns to kim along. An' she's agettin' right sleepy, let me tell yuh."

Thad felt his chum quivering with eagerness as the mountain girl made her way carefully down to

where they awaited her coming. What sort of news Polly could be bringing neither of them could so much as guess; but it would not be long now ere Bob knew the best, or the worst.

CHAPTER XXV.

BOB GETS HIS REWARD.

NEARER came the rustling. They could not yet see Polly, on account of the darkness, but the sound of her voice had reassured them.

Presently a moving figure crept close up to the waiting boys; which they knew must be the queer mountain girl. Polly was far from dainty looking; she had coarse black hair that possibly seldom knew a comb; and her voice was rather harsh; but nevertheless Thad believed she had a heart under this forbidding exterior, and that the spirit of gratitude was transforming her, greatly to their advantage.

"I'm right glad yuh kim, even if 'twar late," she said, as she reached their side.

"We started as soon as we could, Polly," said Bob, wondering if the girl really felt hurt because she had been kept waiting. "You see, I had to cross the valley, and talk with my cousin, Bertha. It was very important that I should see her, for she had news to give me, news that we hope will end in taking her away from that cruel old miser, and giving her over to the keeping of my own dear mother."

Polly grunted, as though she felt that she had to exhibit some sign of displeasure; but she said no more on that subject.

"I done found the Still," she remarked, simply.

"That's good, Polly," Bob said, warmly.

"Caus I'd be'n thar afore, but 'twas a long time ago," she went on, as if in apology for any difficulty she may have run across in finding the secret workshop of her father.

"Yes," Bob went on, encouragingly, as she stopped.

"Yuh see, they don't want gals er wimen ahangin' 'round thar. An' ever since they begun ter keep a prisoner ter work ther mash, I reckons as how never one hes be'n up ter thet place."

"But you hadn't forgotten just how to get there, had you, Polly; you knew the old trail, even with its changes; and did they have a prisoner; or was it just a story that's been going around all this time?"

Bob's impatience could not hold back any longer. He felt that he must know the truth with regard to this fact, right away. If there was no prisoner after all, then hope must sink out of sight. On the other hand, should Polly say that she had discovered a guard, and a patient working figure kept in restraint for long, weary months, he might still hug that fond illusion to his heart, that it might yet turn out to be his own father.

"Yep, I gut thar, even if they had hid the trail

right smart," the girl continued, " an' sure 'nuff, thar war a prisoner!"

" Oh!" said Bob, and Thad could feel him quiver again with eagerness.

The girl was slow, not because she wished to tantalize Bob, but simply on account of her sluggish nature. The hook-worm has a firm grip upon most of the " poor whites " of North Carolina, as well as in Tennessee and Georgia close at hand. It would take something out of the common to arouse Polly; a sudden peril perhaps; or the anticipation of a new dress, which latter could not be an event occurring in less than yearly stages, Thad had thought.

" An' he war a man," Polly went on, dreamily; " jest like yuh thought, Bob; but his hair hed growed so long, and thar was so much beard on his face, I jest reckons his own mother wudn't never a knowed 'im."

" But did you get close enough to him to say a single word, Polly—just to ask him who he was?" the boy demanded, faintly.

Thad unconsciously let his arm glide around the figure of his chum. He seemed to fear the result, no matter what the answer of the mountain girl might be.

" Sure I did. Thet's what I went up thar fur, ain't it?" Polly went on to say. " They hed him chained ter ther rock. I reckons thar mout a be'n a guard alongside, sum o' ther time; but right then he

must a be'n away. So arter peekin' around, an' not seein' any critter astandin' sentry, I jest mosied up clost ter ther man, an' touched him on ther arm."

She paused again, as if to collect her thoughts, and then yawned; but it was only through habit, and not because Polly felt sleepy; far from it, she was seldom more wide-awake than just then, though it was hard for Thad to believe it.

"He looked kinder s'prised tuh see me, 'cause like I done tole yuh, gals, they ain't never be'n 'lowed 'round thar, sense he was took. In course I tole him as how I jest kim ter fin' out who he mout be, 'case thar was somebody as 'peared mighty wantin' ter know thet same."

"And did he tell you; could he speak still, and explain?" asked Bob.

"He shore cud, Bob," she replied, a little more earnestly now, as though she realized that the critical point of her narrative had been reached. "I never'd a knowed him, wid all ther hair on his face; but when he says his name it was shore enuff—" and she paused dramatically.

"My father?" gasped Bob.

"Yep, an' no other then Mistah Quail, as used ter be ther marshal o' this deestrict sum years ago,—yer own dad, Bob!"

Thad tightened his grip upon his chum, for he felt him quivering violently. It was a tremendous shock, since, for more than two years now, Bob and

his mother had been forced to believe the one they loved so dearly must be dead; but they say that joy never kills, and presently Bob was able to command his voice again.

"Oh! you'll never know what that means to me, Polly!" he exclaimed, as he groped around until he had found the girl's hand, which doubtless he pressed warmly in his great gratitude. "To think that my poor father has been alive all this time, and a slave up here in the wild mountains, while mother and I have been enjoying all the comforts and luxuries of our home. It just seems to cut me to the heart. But Polly, you talked with him, didn't you?"

"Shore I did. He done tole me he mout a got free a long time ago, if he'd 'greed ter promise my dad never ter tell whar ther ole Still war hid; an' never ter kim inter ther mountings agin ahuntin' moonshine stuff. But he sez as how, sense he still must be in ther employ o' ther Gov'nment, he's bound ter do his duty; an' not in er thousand years wud he change his mind."

"Oh! that is jest like father," murmured the boy, partly in admiration, yet with a touch of genuine grief in his voice, because of the unnecessary suffering they had all endured on account of this stubborn trait on the part of the one-time marshal.

"I tells him thet all ther same, he wa'n't agwine ter stay thar much longer, it didn't matter whether he guv ther promise er not, 'case thar hed be'n a

change. An' then I ups an' tells him 'bout yer bein' hyar in ther mountings, bound ter larn ef he was erlive."

"Yes, and was he pleased when he heard that, Polly?" asked Bob, who was gradually coming around in fine shape, now that the stupendous disclosure had been accomplished, and his anxiety a thing of the past.

"I shud say he war," replied the girl, a little aroused now. "Say, he done *cry*, thet's what. Reckons as how he mout a be'n sorry fur not promisin' like they wanted long ergo. He arsks as how yer looked, an' ef yer mam war still well. Caus I cudn't tell him a heap, 'cause I didn't know; but I sez ter him thet yer hed kim hyar ter fotch 'im home, an' it'd be a shame ef yer hed ter go back erlone, jest 'cause he wanted ter be ugly. So he says as how he'd be'n athinkin', an' mout change his mind 'bout thet thar promise."

"Oh! to think of it, Thad," Bob breathed, gripping the arm of his staunch chum eagerly; "my father is alive after all these terrible months; and perhaps he'll even go home with me. It's worth all I've suffered ten times, yes a thousand times over."

"You deserve all the happiness there can be going, Bob, sure you do," declared the scoutmaster, positively. "I guess nothing could be too good for you. But we don't just understand yet how this is going

to be brought about. Will Phin Dady let him go free if he makes that promise, Polly?"

"Shore, he's jest *got* ter, now," the girl answered, with a little chuckle. "Yer see, like I sez afore, things, have changed a heap now, an' my dad, he hain't a feelin' thet sore agin ther marshal like he used ter. An' Bob Quail, even ef he warn't gwine ter do hit, arter wat I larned this same night, I tells yer I'd set yer dad free on my own 'count."

"What did you learn?" asked Thad, curiously, seeing that apparently the girl could not of her own free will tell a story, but it had to be drawn from her piece meal, through the means of questions.

"I war acomin' down ther mounting," she began, "an' 'bout harf way hyah I seen thet ther lights war a movin' down in ther valley. So I jest natchally stopped ter read what ther news was, 'spectin' thet it meant trouble fur you-uns. But the more I reads ther more I gits wise ter ther fack thet yer be'n an' done hit sum moah."

"Yes," said Thad, encouragingly, though already he understood what was coming.

"'Pears like 'tain't enuff fur yer ter skeer off thet cat, an' keep me from agittin' my face clawed handsome, but yer must go an' save ther life o' my uncle Cliff. I reads thet he was hurt bad by Nate's gun goin' off, an' bleedin' a heap, so's they feels sure he never kin be took 'crost ter the doc's alive. Then

they jest happen on yer camp down thar; an' shore he gut his arm fixed up so's ter stop ther blood comin'; an' they fotched him acrost ther valley in good shape."

"It was only a little thing, Polly, and gave me a great deal of pleasure," said Thad, thrilled despite himself by the girl's simple recital of the event.

"P'raps 'twar," she replied, sturdily; "but my maw, she sots some store by Uncle Cliff; an' dad, he cain't nowise go agin wot she wants. So I sees right plain like it was writ, thet Bob, he's bound arter this, ter git his dad free."

"Oh! it's like a dream to me, Thad; I feel as if I must be asleep. Give me a pinch or something, won't you, and let me understand that I'm alive," Bob exclaimed.

"You're awake, all right, old fellow," replied Thad, with a nervous little laugh. "And unless I miss my guess, Polly here is going to give you another pleasant little surprise; ain't you, Polly?"

"W'en I larns thet 'bout my uncle," continued the mountain girl, "I jest thinks as how Bob hyah, he's be'n a wantin' ter larn somethin' 'bout his ole man ther longest time ever. An' so I makes up my min' ter fotch 'im right away up ter ther Still in ther cave, so's ter see how the man as is chained'd feel ter git his boy in his arms onct agin!"

"Oh! Polly, however can I thank you?" ex-

claimed the excited Bob; "please let's start then right away. I thought I was tired, but now I'm feelin' as fresh as ever I could be. You couldn't go too quick to suit me!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE "STILL" IN THE MOUNTAIN CAVE.

"HIT'S sum climb," said Polly, doubtfully.

"But think what is at the end of it," answered the eager Bob. "Why, to see my father again, I'd go all night, and then some. Please don't say you won't, Polly, after giving me your promise."

"I'm gwine tuh leave hit tuh him," said the girl simply, and both of them understood that she meant Thad; for doubtless Polly had guessed before now that he was the leader of the boys in uniform, and that what he said was authority.

Thad knew there was no such thing as trying to restrain his chum, now that the fever was in his veins; nor did he have any desire to do so.

"He'll make it, all right, I think, Polly," he remarked, quietly.

"Sure I will; so let's start," declared the other.

Polly, of course, was willing. She did not seem to give one thought to herself; and yet Thad remembered how swollen her ankle had seemed, after such a bad twisting in the cleft of the rock that same

afternoon, when the angry wildcat threatened to jump at her. But then Polly had been reared among the mountains that seem to meet the sky; and she was a girl accustomed to standing all manner of pain as well as any grown man could have done.

They started to climb upward.

One thing favored them, for which Thad was really glad. Polly knew every foot of the rough country like a scholar might the printed pages of a book. She could lead them along trails that they never would have suspected existed at all, hidden as they were from the eye of a stranger, by the artful moonshiners. And while possibly the climbing might be difficult, it was never as bad as the boys had found it when ascending the mountain in the day time.

Bob for a wonder kept quiet. Of course he needed all his wind to carry him through. Then again, he was naturally turning over in his mind the amazing thing that had just come to him, and trying to realize his wonderful good fortune.

The thought that he was about to see his dear father shortly was enough to fill his mind, to the exclusion of all else. And so he continued to follow close after the nimble girl, while Thad brought up the rear.

They paused to rest several times. No doubt it was more on account of these two boys, quite unaccustomed to such harsh labor as climbing a moun-

tain, that compelled Polly to pause; because otherwise, she could have kept straight on, without any rest.

"We's gittin' thar now, she remarked, finally, as they halted for the fourth time, with Bob fairly panting for breath, and Thad himself secretly confessing that this mountain climbing after a sure-footed girl who had shown herself as nimble as a goat, was no "cinch."

"I'm glad to hear that news, Polly," Bob admitted candidly; but then it may have been on account of the fact that he was nearer the meeting with his long-lost father, rather than an admission that he was tired.

"Jest wun moah stop, an' shore we'll be thar; p'raps we cud make her right smart from hyah, ef so be yuh felt fresh enuff," Polly explained.

"Let's try, anyhow," declared Bob; "you don't know how much I can stand. Why, I used to climb these same mountains as well as you ever could; and it'd be queer if I'd forgot all I ever knew."

"Thet sounds jest like a Quail," remarked the girl, with a chuckle, as she once more took up the work.

The last part of the climb was certainly the roughest of all. Old Phin had hidden his secret Still in a quarter of the rocky uplift where no revenue man thus far had ever been able to look upon it of his own free will.

But finally they heard Polly say that it was close by. Thad also noticed that the girl had changed her manner more or less. She climbed now without making the slightest noise; just as though some instinct, born of her life in the zone where warfare always existed between her people and the Government agents, had caused her to exercise caution.

Thad saw that they were approaching what must be a rocky gully, leading to some sort of cave. He remembered that Polly had, while speaking, happened to mention the fact that her father's famous Still was located in a cave, which could never be found by the smartest agent the authorities had ever sent to look for such illegal distilleries.

"Look out yer don't slip!" came in a low but thrilling whisper from the guide at this juncture; and from this Thad assumed that they must be passing along the edge of some dizzy precipice, that had to do with the safety of the manufactory, the existence of which had so long taunted the Government.

Now and then Polly would give a slight pause. At such times Thad believed she must be looking cautiously around, to make sure that the guard had not returned to the place since she left there some time before.

Then he realized that he could no longer see the stars overhead. From this he judged they must have passed underground; and that this was a fact

he presently learned when, by stretching out his hand, he felt the cold rock close by.

All around them was pitch darkness at first, and the girl had made Bob take hold of her dress, while Thad in the rear kept a hand on his chum's back as they moved slowly along.

Presently the watchful scoutmaster made a little discovery that afforded him pleasure. There must be a light ahead somewhere, for he began to catch a faint glow, such as might come from a lantern.

This illumination grew gradually stronger, until they could actually manage to see dimly around them.

"Wait hyah foh me, till I see ef ther coast is clar," whispered the girl.

The two scouts saw her slip away. It struck Thad that possibly he and his chums had much to learn ere they could pass along as noiselessly as this mountain girl.

How the seconds dragged. Each one must have seemed torture to poor anxious Bob, knowing as he did that the one he had long mourned as dead was so near at hand. They heard nothing save a dripping sound, which might have been caused by water. Evidently the secret Still was not in operation just then; and words dropped by Polly gave Thad the impression that possibly it had ceased work for all time, because of some reason that brought about a change in the conditions.

Polly could not have been gone more than five minutes before she came gliding back again to where she had left the boys.

"Hit's all right, an' thar don't 'pear ter be any guard 'round."

She plucked at Bob's coat sleeve, as if to let him understand that he could come on now; as if the boy needed a second invitation.

They turned a bend in the narrow passage ahead, and Thad drew a long breath as he looked upon one of the most remarkable scenes it had ever been his fortune to see.

The cave was a natural grotto, rock-ribbed, and as firm as the everlasting foundations of the mountains themselves. The moonshiners had fitted it up for their purpose; and there, for the first time Thad saw what a Still looked like. After all, it did not amount to much, the worm being the most interesting part of it. But then the fact that he was now gazing upon the very Still that revenue men had for years tried in vain to discover and wreck, gave the scoutmaster a sensation akin to awe.

But all this he saw with one sweeping glance. There was more. A clanking as of a chain drew his attention to a figure that had arisen from a bench, and was pushing the long hair from his eyes to watch their entrance. Evidently Polly during her short absence must have whispered to the prisoner that Bob was close by.

There was, of course, no such thing as holding Bob back any longer. He saw that ragged and altogether uncouth figure, which of course bore not the least resemblance to the father he remembered so well; but he also had discovered a pair of extended arms, and toward their shelter the boy fairly leaped.

Another instant and Bob Quail was wrapped in the embrace of the parent he had not seen in more than two years, and whose fate it had been to remain here a prisoner among the moonshiners who hated him so thoroughly, while his dear ones mourned him as dead.

After a few minutes Thad moved closer, and gave a little cough, wishing to let his chum know that he had a comrade tried and true near by. With that Bob started up, and gripped him by the arm.

"This is my best friend, Thad Brewster, father," he said.

Thad shook hands with the emaciated man who had been confined in this underground retreat so long. In spite of the long beard and strange looks of the other, he realized that Mr. Quail was no ordinary man. But then Thad had guessed that already, from what he had heard about the one-time marshal.

"This is a mighty big piece of luck for Bob?" Thad remarked. "It seems nearly too good to be

true; and he'll be the happiest boy in the States when he takes you back home with him, sir."

"Home!" repeated the prisoner; "how strange that word sounds, after being shut up here so long. And how queer the outside world will seem to me. But I hope the promise Old Phin Dady made me, still holds good; for I've no longer the desire to hold out against his will. In my own mind I'm no longer on the pay-roll of the Government, for he tells me every one believes me dead; so I can take the vow with a clear conscience. Yes, I'm hoping to go home with my boy."

Thad felt that all now remaining for them to do was to get in communication with the moonshiner, and have Mr. Quail set at liberty. Surely after what he and Bob had done for the family of Phin Dady, the latter could not refuse to let his prisoner go; especially since he now professed his willingness to make the promise that up to this time he had absolutely declined to subscribe to.

They were still talking in this strain when a sound like a cough drew their attention, and looking up, Thad discovered a grim figure leaning on his gun not twenty feet away. There was no need to ask who the man was, for every one of them had already recognized the moonshiner, Phin Dady!

CHAPTER XXVII.

BUMPUS CALLS FOR THREE CHEERS.

THE mountaineer was the first to speak.

"'Pears like I was interruptin' a leetle fambly reunion," he remarked, drily.

At any rate, Thad noticed, there did not seem to be any great show of anger in the actions or words of the man. Nor was he leveling that terrible gun, which had doubtless brought consternation into the hearts of more than one invading group of revenue officers in times past.

Indeed, Thad was rather inclined to think Old Phin looked remarkably docile, as though his claws had been pulled, and he no longer felt that the whole world was against him.

Mr. Quail, however, did not see things in this way. He was not aware of the great change that had come about in the Dady family, that threatened to remove from the Blue Ridge the most remarkable and picturesque figure the region had ever known.

"I'm ready to make that promise you once put

before me, Phin!" he cried out, as if secretly fearing that harm might fall upon the head of his venturesome boy, because of his braving the moonshiner's wrath by searching out the secret Still.

"Hit's too late fur thet, Mistah Quail!" declared the other grimly.

"But surely you wouldn't think of changing your mind now?" said the prisoner.

"Thet's jest what I done, suh," answered Phin. "Polly, I'se noticin' as how yuh brung them byes up hyah tuh the old Still. Reckons as how yuh never'd dared do thet same on'y foh what's cum ter pass."

"Reckons as how I wudn't, dad," replied the girl; who, somehow, did not seem to display any particular fear of the stern parent, such as might have been expected under the circumstances.

"Are you going to let me go free, Phin Dady?" demanded the prisoner, hoarsely.

For answer the moonshiner stepped forward, and with a key he produced, released the iron that had been fastened about the ankle of the one-time revenue marshal.

"I give you the promise you wanted, Phin, and never will I tell a living soul where the hiding-place of your Still lies," Mr. Quail declared, trying to conceal his emotion as a brave man might.

"Thet's good o' ye, Mistah Quail," remarked

the other, with one of his dry chuckles that somehow Thad liked to hear.

"And more than that, Phin," continued the other, earnestly, "I agree never again to enter these mountains in search of the men who live here, and who believe they have a right to make this moonshine stuff as they please, whether the authorities down in Washington let them or not. I've resigned as a marshal, Phin. You and your friends will never have to think of me again as an enemy. And I suppose then that the curious public will never get the sight of this famous Still of yours, that I boasted they would."

"Thet's whar yuh makes a mistake, suh," said the old man, with a wide grin. "I reckons now as it's a gwine to be ther trade mark ter be used on ther bottles. I be'n tole thet it ort ter help make sales, w'en they knows the new medicine, made outen roots an' yarbs got in ther mountings, an' wich cures all kinds o' shakes an' chills like magic, is manufactured in ther same old Still as Phin Dady cooked moonshine stuff foh nigh on ten hull yeahs."

"What's that?" exclaimed the late prisoner, while Polly laughed softly, like one who sees a new life opening up before her.

Thad began to see glimpses of light. He remembered the strange words used by the girl from time to time. Yes, there *had* a change taken place;

things were never going to be the same as they had been in the past. Accident had opened the eyes of the old mountaineer, and he had discovered a way to make money, with the Government for, not against him.

"W'y, yuh see," he began, rather clumsily; when Polly took the words from his mouth, being so full of the subject that she just could not hold in.

"He used ter make up a kind o' medicine w'enever we gut ther shakes, an' it did the bizness the slickest yuh ever did see, suh," she started to say. "Thar was a man as kim erlong heah, an' heerd 'bout hit. So he sez as how he'd like ter take a bottle erlong, and hev it tested. W'ich they done, an' writ as how it was sich a wonder thet p'raps dad, he cud supply ther trade. An' on'y yist'day he done gits a letter, suh, as binds ther bargain. Old Phin, he ain't agwine tuh make moonshine no moah. We's ameanin' tuh go tuh town, jest as soon's we heahs from ther people in Washington, as these drug men hes gone ter see. Yuh know hit wudn't be nice if they sot on my dad as soon as he showed up, an' locked him in prison, 'case as how he use ter make mounting dew on ther sly."

Crudely expressed as it was, Thad understood the whole story now. It fairly took his breath away, it was so strange. To think of this gaunt old mountaineer having discovered a medicine that was going to prove as great a benefit to mankind as the stuff

he had been hitherto manufacturing was a curse! It was almost too wonderful for belief.

"Do you mean that the gentlemen who mean to handle the product of your Still in the future are trying to get the authorities to wipe all the past off the slate, and let your father start fresh?" asked Mr. Quail.

"Thems erbout hit, suh," Polly replied, nodding her head. "Hand we-uns 'spect ter live in town arter this, whar p'raps I kin wear a hat, an' hev sum shoes as hain't big ernuff fur a man, an' git some larnin' in school. Soon's as we knows, we reckons on movin'."

"And Phin Dady, perhaps I might be of assistance to you down at Washington, once I get to a barber, and look something respectable," said the late prisoner.

"D'ye mean thet ye don't hold no grudge agin me foh what I done tuh ye?" demanded the old moonshiner, evidently surprised.

"That's just what I mean," replied the other, heartily. "Outside of keeping me a prisoner, and even that was partly my fault, you've not been harder on me than one might expect. And I'm so happy now, with this noble lad by my side, and the knowledge that my wife still lives, that I couldn't bear you any ill feeling. I hope you'll be a big success in your new business; and here's my hand, if you care to take it."

"Hurrah!" cried Bob, feeling like throwing up his hat when he saw the two men, enemies for so long, shaking hands in a friendly way.

Thad himself had never felt so light-hearted. It seemed as though all of their troubles had suddenly taken flight, and the future looked bright indeed. This hike through the Blue Ridge had turned out ten times more wonderful than any of them had ever dreamed, when the undertaking was first discussed, away up in Cranford. It had given Bob back a father whom he had believed was dead; and presently Bertha, too, would be taken from the guardian who had no real legal right to her charge.

The Boy Scouts would be able to go back to their home town with a feather in their hats, after accomplishing so many wonderful things.

But how were they going to get down to the far-away camp? Would Mr. Quail, who must be weak on account of having been kept in the cavern so long, be able to stand the rough trip? Perhaps, after all, they had better stay there during the balance of the night, and wait for daylight to come.

Thad was perfectly willing to leave all this to the gentleman himself; and presently he became aware that they were even then discussing it.

His long and bitter association with those cold walls, and that Still, must have given Mr. Quail a dislike for the sight of them; because he expressed

himself as only too willing to start down without delay.

"It's true that I'm not as strong as I might be right now," he admitted; "but that weakness ought to pass away as I get the fresh air. Besides, having my boy at my side will work wonders. Yes, please do not let my condition keep us here one minute longer than is absolutely necessary."

And so they all started down. Since there was no longer any need for secrecy, Polly carried the lantern along.

After all, it was not such very hard work. With a light to show them what they had to avoid, and a pilot who knew every foot of the mountainside, they made very fair progress indeed. Even Mr. Quail declared he was getting stronger all the time, as he drew in big quantities of the sweet mountain air, so different from that he had been enduring so long, tainted with the fumes of the Still.

Once Polly haulted, and drew their attention to a light far down.

"Thet's yer fire," was what she said, simply; and both Bob and Thad allowed their gaze to fall upon the flicker with a sense of deep satisfaction; for they knew that they were about to prove to be messengers of good tidings to those tried and true comrades so anxiously awaiting their return.

Thad forgot that his feet burned, and that his muscles cried out in protest against such unusual

exertion; the thing that had happened was of so wonderful a nature that every time he thought about it he told himself he ought to consider himself equal to the task of walking up and down hill all the remainder of the night, without a single groan or falter.

Now they were evidently drawing nearer the lower part of the mountain. Glimpses they caught of the camp-fire told them this good news. Besides, Thad really began to recognize his surroundings.

And he was not so very much surprised when Polly suddenly stopped and pointing to the rock at her feet, remarked:

"Hit war right thar, dad, as I got cort by ther foot; an' on thet ledge yonder ther cat squatted, agrowlin' and spittin' like the Ole Nick, and meanin' tuh jump right on me. See, hyars a stick thet helped tuh beat him off. An' as yuh knows, 'twar this same boy, Thad they calls 'im, as dun fixed Uncle Cliff up, so's Nate an' Tom, they cud fotch him acrost tuh ther doc. Reckon we ort tuh do all we kin ter show 'em ther Dady fambly hes gut feelins."

"Shore we ort, gal, an' we's agwine tuh do thet same," declared Old Phin.

"We don't doubt it," said Thad, more or less affected by these evidences of gratitude on the part of the mountaineer and his daughter. "What I did

was only a little thing you know, that could hardly count."

"But hit saved Cliff's life, an' thet meant sumthin' foh him," the girl continued, with a shake of her tousled head. "Come erlong, an' let's git down thar. Reckons as how a cup o' coffee'd taste right good tuh yuh dad."

"Coffee!" echoed Mr. Quail, as though the very sound of the word touched his inmost feelings; "it'll seem like nectar for the gods just to smell it again, after—but no matter, it was the best they had, and I oughtn't to say anything."

All the same Thad noticed that his steps quickened a little, and he seemed to sniff the air from time to time, as if in imagination he could already catch a faint whiff of the treat in store for him.

As they drew closer to the camp Thad could see that some of the boys were sitting there. Perhaps they had been too anxious to even try and sleep; though he believed he knew of one at least who could never have held out all this while, no matter how strong his determination.

Waiting until they had arrived within a certain distance, and there was no evidence that any one had noticed the descending lantern, Thad gave vent to a call. It was the bark of the fox, and used by the members of the patrol as a signal in case they wished to communicate with one another.

He saw the figures about the fire quicken into life.

They seemed to jump to their feet, and stare about them, as if unable to understand what that call meant.

A little to the surprise of Thad his signal was repeated from a point close by, and immediately Allan Hollister showed up. Undoubtedly the Maine boy had been scouting around the borders of the camp, seeking to guard against any surprise. He had watched the coming of the group with the lantern, and guessed that two of them must be the missing comrades, Thad and Bob.

When they all stalked into camp, the boys were thunderstruck to see Old Phin and his daughter, apparently on the best of terms with their comrades; and as for the tall man with the long hair and beard, they could easily guess who he must be by the way Bob Quail clung to his hand.

Then Bumpus called for three cheers, and they were given with a vim that made the valley echo from side to side. Possibly some of those moonshiner videttes must have started up, wondering what on earth could be occurring in the camp of the Boy Scouts.

There was little chance that any of the boys would get a wink of sleep during the remainder of that eventful night. Long did they sit there by the revived fire, watching Mr. Quail drink his coffee, cup after cup, and listening to the strangest story they had ever heard. Even when finally, along about

three in the morning, they were induced to lie down upon their various beds of leaves and grass, sleep must have utterly refused to visit their eyes, save in the case of Bumpus himself; and he could drop into slumber in almost "any old position, even if he were hanging by his heels," as Giraffe used to say.

And so the night passed away, and another morning found them, red-eyed but joyful beyond compare; for they felt that their great hike among the mountains had turned out to be the finest thing possible, both for their comrade, Bob, and themselves.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HOME AGAIN—CONCLUSION.

THE mountain hike had come to an end.

One and all, the Boy Scouts declared that they had seen about enough of this wild country of the Blue Ridge, and would be glad to turn their steps toward dear old Cranford. They believed they could find other ways to enjoy themselves that offered better inducements than climbing the sides of mountains, with suspicious moonshiners watching their every move.

Of course, now that Old Phin Dady had taken them under his protection, they had no reason to fear any bodily harm. And what Thad had done for Cliff Dorie must go pretty far toward making them friends among the ignorant mountain people. But because Old Phin meant to desert his former calling for one that would have the sanction of the law, did not mean that moonshine stuff would not continue to be made up in the dells back of the trail in the Smoky Range. There were many others who knew no other means for making a slim livelihood, than

by cheating the Government of the heavy tax it placed on strong drink.

So the scouts decided, by a unanimous vote, that they had seen enough of these parts; and would hail with delight an order to turn their backs on it all. Besides, did they not know that both Bob and his father would be fairly wild to hasten to the waiting mother and wife in that Northern home?

They made the start as soon as they could get in marching order. Polly and her father accompanied them through the mountains. This was considered best, lest some suspicious moonshiner think it his duty to take a pot shot or two at those figures far down the valley, wearing the khaki uniform he hated.

At every cabin they passed, the natives swarmed out to see the strange sight of Old Phin walking amiably by the side of the boy soldiers, as they supposed the scouts to be. Once or twice there was an ugly demonstration, some of the natives fancying that the mountaineer must have surrendered, and was being carried off to jail. It took considerable explaining to get these people to understand the truth about things, and that Phin was on the best of terms with the boys.

Finally he dared go no further, because as yet he did not know what success his agents, the drug men, had in Washington; and there was danger of revenue men sighting him at any moment, when trouble

must break out, since there had been war between them for so long.

When the little party of scouts turned up again in Asheville, they found plenty to do there to keep them over until another day. First of all, Mr. Quail underwent a complete transformation at the hands of a barber; for he declared he believed the sight of him, in his present condition, with such long hair and beard, would be enough to send his poor wife into a fit, or else have her drive him from the door as a pretender.

And when he appeared before the scouts, decently dressed in a new suit, which Bob's money paid for, as he had none himself just then, Bumpus voiced the sentiments of the entire patrol when he declared that Mr. Quail was as fine looking a gentleman as he knew.

Of course a message had been sent to Cranford, to apprise Bob's mother of the glorious result of his hike down in the Blue Ridge country, which they had once upon a time called home. It had to be very carefully worded, lest the shock to her nerves prove too great. And in another day, father and son hoped to be once more with the one who would not sleep a wink until her own eyes beheld the loved form which she believed had gone from her forever.

Then there was that affair concerning little Bertha to be considered. Great had been the indignation of Mr. Quail when, on examining the paper which

Bob had secured through the help of the girl, he realized all the rascality that Reuben Sparks had been guilty of.

They held an interview with a well-known lawyer, who, on hearing the facts, and seeing the legal document, advised them to leave it all in his charge.

"I promise you that this party will be summoned to appear forthwith, bringing his ward with him," this legal gentleman had declared; "and once within the jurisdiction of the court, it will be an easy matter to dispossess him. Indeed, should he show fight, we can have him sent up for a term of years."

With such a pleasant prospect before them, did the scouts leave the Old Tar-heel State. They had come down here for an outing, and to see what Bob had once called his home; but the tour had turned out to be a more serious affair than any of them could ever have anticipated.

And now they were on the way home again, filled with memories of the many events that had seasoned their brief stay in the Land of the Sky; home to familiar scenes and to look upon faces that were dear to them.

A jolly party they were on the train that bore them away toward the North. Bob and his father sat by themselves, for they had a thousand things to talk about, that concerned only their private interests. But the rest clustered at one end of the sleeper,

and eagerly reviewed the stories they would have to tell.

"Oh! we'll have the greatest time ever, just showing the fellers how we did it," declared Bumpus. "First of all, we'll get Giraffe to wade into a creek, and explain how he was bein' pulled down by that sucking quicksand, when the prompt arrival of the rest of the bunch saved his precious life. I always heard that when one's just born to be hanged there ain't no use tryin' to get rid of him by any other means; which I guess stands for quicksand too."

"That sounds mighty fine, Bumpus," remarked Giraffe, unmoved by the laughter greeting the proposition; "but just think what a great stunt it'll be when we get Davy Jones here showing 'em what he c'n do dropping down head-first into a bully old camp-fire, and swimmin' in red coals. That ought to bring down the house; if only we c'n coax him to do it over again."

"Not much you will," declared the said Davy, looking ruefully at sundry red marks on both his wrists, that served to remind him of the accident. "Once is enough for me; and I tell you right now, fellows, if ever I *do* climb a tree again, to exercise, I'm going to be mighty careful I don't hang down over a blaze. There's such a thing as takin' too many chances."

"A burnt child dreads the fire," sang out Step Hen.

"Hello! are you there, old sobersides?" remarked Giraffe, pretending to be surprised; "now, we all of us thought you might be busy writin' out in your mind a treatise on how to be happy watching a tumble-bug try to roll his big ball uphill; or else what lessons can be gained by watching the humble beetle in his never-say-die act as a gymnast. But I see you've got your badge right-side up to-day, all to the good, Step Hen; what wonderful stunt have you been pulling off now?"

"Oh! it didn't amount to much, I guess, fellows; but then even a little speck of kindness counts, they say," remonstrated Step Hen.

"I happen to know," remarked Thad, breaking into the conversation; "for I was just coming into that other ordinary car, when I saw our comrade doing himself proud. Perhaps it *is* only a little thing for a boy to notice that a poor woman with three kids clinging to her skirts, and a baby in her arms, wants to get a bottle of milk warmed, and don't know just how to manage it; and to offer to do it for her; but let me tell you, that poor tired mother said 'thank you, my boy' just as if it meant a *heap* to her! Yes, Step Hen, you had a right to turn your badge; and I only hope you find as good a chance to do it every single day, as you did on this one."

And Giraffe became suddenly silent. Perhaps something within told him that he too had passed

that same weary mother; and if he thought anything at all at the time it was only to wonder why a woman could be so silly as to travel with so many children.

"Well, you see," remarked Step Hen, feeling that some sort of explanation was expected from him, after the scoutmaster had given him the "spot light" on the stage. "I got to talkin' with her afterwards, and she told me that the children's paw had just died down South, and she was on her way home to her mother's. After hearin' that, fellers, I wanted to do anything more I could for the poor thing; and I did jump off at the last station, and buy the kids some sandwiches, 'cause, you see, they didn't have a great lot to munch on. But it was worth while to watch 'em gobble the snack of chicken I got along with 'em, like they hadn't had a bite to eat this livelong day."

Thad walked away, satisfied that Step Hen was proving his worth as a scout. That little lesson of the humble bug had opened his eyes, and through those touched his heart. Perhaps he might not change all at once, for he was inclined to stumble, and fall down, when he had made good resolutions; but the chances were he would see more in life than ever before.

And that is what a scout wants to do, keep his eyes open all the while, in order to notice many of the strange things that are happening every minute

of the day all around him; until he learns to do that which will give him the greatest treat that could possibly happen to any one.

Time was when Step Hen might have passed that poor mother, and never have given her a second thought; but it was different now. And the strange thing about it, in Thad's mind, was that an obscure little tumble-bug, one of the lowliest of all created things, could have succeeded in showing Step Hen that he had a heart; and that even a boy can find chances to do kindly acts, if he looks for them.

"Well," said Bumpus, as they huddled together in a bunch, exchanging views and watching the mountains and valleys as they were whirled past, "if we could have the say right now where the Silver Fox Patrol would spend next vacation, where d'ye reckon it would be?"

"Let's take a vote!" suggested Step Hen.

"That's the ticket, Mr. Secretary, get eight ballots ready, and let's write first choice and second, majority rules," and the patrol leader nodded in the direction of his chum Allan, just as much as to say it was easy to guess what one vote would be.

"Count as I call out, Bob White. Here goes now: Maine first choice, Rocky Mountains second."

"Hurrah!" cried Bumpus.

"Another for Maine, with the Saskatchewan country of Canada second," Thad went on; "but this comrade forgot that as American Boy Scouts

we do not want to spend our money and vacations in a foreign land."

When the eight ballots had been counted, strange to say Maine was first choice with every one, and the Rockies well in the lead as second.

"Move we make it unanimous," laughed Giraffe, which was duly done according to statute.

"Much good that will do, with a whole year to wait, because it wouldn't pay to go up into Maine for only Christmas week," grumbled Step Hen.

But strange to say it was decreed in a most remarkable way that the wish expressed by the scouts should be made an actual fact, and just how this came about the reader will find duly set forth in the third volume of this series entitled, "The Boy Scouts on the Trail, or Scouting through the Big Game Country."

In due time the scouts arrived at Cranford station, where their coming had been anticipated; for the story of how the boys had found the missing husband of Mrs. Quail had somehow gotten around, since Cranford had its gossips. One of these happened to be calling on the lady at the time Bob's telegram arrived. Of course its nature was such as to give Mrs. Quail a shock, though she quickly recovered; but there had been ample time for the visitor to glance at the message, between dabs at the face of the fainting lady with a handkerchief wet with cologne. And that was how the news got out.

"Look at the crowd, would you?" gasped Bumpus, as he poked his head out of the door, and saw what seemed to his excited imagination about the whole of Cranford filling the home station, and craning necks in the endeavor to be the first to glimpse the resurrected father of Bob Quail.

"Hurrah for the Boy Scouts!" some one called out.

They were given with a rush and a roar that brought other passengers hurrying to the windows of the cars, to see what popular hero it could be arriving home, to excite such a tremendous demonstration.

"Hurrah for Thad Brewster!" called a second school-boy, as the young scoutmaster stepped off the train, bearing certain bundles, that might be a haversack and a take-down shotgun.

Another wave of applause went sweeping up from the crowd.

"Three cheers for Bob Quail, and his dad!" shrilled yet another enthusiast; upon which the echoes were fairly awakened by the racket.

The scouts fell into line, and two and two marched along the station platform; for Mr. Quail had already taken his wife into his arms, and they had retired to the interior of the little building, in order to be less conspicuous while they talked it all over.

Bumpus sounded his bugle, and the boys kept

step as they walked along, with heads up, and feeling that they had gained the right to feel a bit proud, after what they had gone through. The crowd pushed after them, still shouting, and making a great clamor.

And from one of the car windows looked a bevy of childish faces, back of which was the wan one of the tired mother; Step Hen disobeyed the rules for one second only, when he turned, and waved his hand to his little friends of the train. Seeing which Thad Brewster said softly to himself:

"I warrant you that little woman believes all this noise is meant for just one boy, and he the fellow who was so kind to her; because, in her sight Step Hen is a real hero, and this racket is meant especially for his home-coming."

THE END.